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# Diet of breastfeeding mothers

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## Content of this booklet

A diverse and sufficient diet supports breastfeeding, postnatal recovery and the growth and development of the baby. A good diet also helps the mother cope with their new life with a baby.

This booklet is designed for healthy breastfeeding mothers who are moderately physically active. It should not, however, replace personal guidance given by a healthcare professional. Please contact a registered nutritionist (M.Sc.) if you have any questions about nutrition.

## Key points

- A diverse diet provides all the nutrients required for the well-being of the mother and the growth and development of the baby.
- As the intake of vitamin D is, on average, too limited in Finland, all breastfeeding mothers are recommended to use a vitamin D preparation (10 µg) on a daily basis all year round.
- It is not necessary to avoid any foods when breastfeeding in order to prevent the development of any allergies in the child.
- If key ingredients need to be removed from the mother's diet, a registered nutritionist (M.Sc.) should be contacted.



## Sufficiency and diversity

The need for vitamins and minerals increases when breastfeeding. A diverse diet provides all the nutrients required for the well-being of the mother and the growth and development of the baby. The plate model helps in planning a balanced diet:

- Half of your meal should consist of fresh or cooked vegetables, fruit or berries.
- One quarter of your meal should consist of potatoes or whole-grain products, such as bread, porridge or pasta.
- One quarter of your meal should consist of fish, meat, egg, legumes or dairy products.



Image 1. The plate model helps with putting together a healthy meal (National Nutrition Council 2014).



A sufficient and diverse diet during breastfeeding supports breastfeeding, postnatal recovery and the mother's ability to cope. A diverse diet also improves the composition of breast milk.

### **Sufficient energy**

Breastfeeding increases the need for energy, especially in the first six months. After this, the amount of breast milk declines slowly and the need for energy returns to a normal level. If you donate breast milk or breastfeed more than one baby, you need more energy than normally.

If you eat whenever you feel hungry, the amount of food you eat typically grows naturally to meet the need for energy. Eat at least four meals: a breakfast, lunch, dinner and an evening snack, and an additional 1–2 snacks when necessary. Long intervals between meals can easily make you feel fatigued and lead to uncontrollable eating and extra snacks.

If you have gained a lot of weight during pregnancy or you were overweight before pregnancy, you do not need to eat more when breastfeeding. However, it is important to ensure the diversity of your diet. An example diet of breastfeeding mothers is provided in Table 1. If the appetite of a breastfeeding mother is poor, small meals eaten more frequently, drinking lots of liquids, resting and exercising outdoors may help.

### **Plenty of liquids**

The need for liquids increases according to the amount of breast milk secreted. The best option is to drink a glass of water whenever you breastfeed. Fat-free milk or sour milk are ideal options for a drink during meals.



Table 1. An example of meals eaten by a breastfeeding mother in a day.

Example of meals eaten in a day	
Breakfast	2 slices of whole-grain bread 2 tsp vegetable margarine 2 slices of low-fat cheese or cold cuts plenty of vegetables 2 dl fat-free milk or sour milk coffee or tea
Lunch	2 potatoes, 2 dl whole-grain rice or pasta one portion of fish, meat or vegetable-based food plenty of vegetables 1-2 tbsp of oily salad dressing 2 dl fat-free milk or sour milk
Snack	fruit nuts 2 dl of fat-free yoghurt coffee or tea
Dinner	3 dl soup 2 slices of whole-grain bread 2 tsp vegetable margarine plenty of vegetables 2 dl water 2 dl quark with berries
Evening snack	2 dl porridge 2 dl berries 2 tsp vegetable margarine tea



You can drink coffee and other caffeinated drinks in moderation during breastfeeding (about 3 dl/day). Drinking lots of coffee can make the baby restless, as some of the caffeine is transmitted to breast milk.

You should avoid the use of alcohol when breastfeeding, as the alcohol content of breast milk is equal to the mother's blood alcohol content. If a breastfeeding mother uses alcohol, it may weaken the baby's quality of sleep, eating and growth.

### **Sufficient soft fats**

A sufficient intake of soft fats ensures that the baby gets the essential fatty acids from breast milk. The intake of soft fats is especially important for the development of the baby's vision and nervous system. Changes in your diet affect the composition of breast milk in a matter of hours. Thus, it is important to look after the intake of soft fats every day.

You can increase your intake of soft fats by:

- using vegetable margarine on bread
- using vegetable oils or vegetable or bottled margarine for cooking
- adding an oily salad dressing to your salad
- eating fish at least twice a week
- adding nuts and seeds to your diet.

By favouring fat-free or low-fat dairy products and low-fat meat, the quality of fat in your diet will remain good.



## Vitamin and mineral preparations

By eating diversely and sufficiently, you ensure the intake of most vitamins and minerals. If there are any restrictions in your diet, it is possible that it must be supplemented with vitamin or mineral preparations (Table 2). All breastfeeding mothers are recommended to use a vitamin D preparation (10 µg) on a daily basis all year round.

Table 2. Vitamin and mineral preparations for breastfeeding mothers.

Vitamin or mineral preparation	Dose	Target group
Vitamin D	10 µg/day	All breastfeeding mothers
Iodine	150 µg/day	Breastfeeding mothers with few sources of iodine in diet, such as fish, egg, dairy products or iodised salt.
Calcium	500 mg/day	Breastfeeding mothers with few dairy products or food items with added calcium in their diet.
	1,000 mg/day	Breastfeeding mothers with no dairy products or food items with added calcium in their diet.
Multivitamin and mineral preparation	According to the manufacturer's instructions	Breastfeeding mothers who donate breast milk, feed more than one baby or have a restricted diet.



## Food allergies and breastfeeding

A diverse diet during breastfeeding supports the development of the child's immune system and lowers the risk of the development of food allergies. Because of this, it is not necessary to avoid any foods when breastfeeding in order to prevent the development of any allergies in the child. If you have had a special diet before breastfeeding, you should continue observing this diet when breastfeeding.

If the baby has severe allergic symptoms, the cause of the symptoms must be diagnosed carefully. The mother's diet should never be restricted randomly or unnecessarily. If key ingredients, such as dairy or grain products, need to be removed from the diet, a registered nutritionist (M.Sc.) should be contacted.

## Breastfeeding and exercise

Breastfeeding mothers should also exercise. Moderately intense exercise does not have any effect on breastfeeding or the quality or quantity of breast milk. Regular postnatal exercise helps you control your weight, improves your condition and makes you feel more energetic. Recommended forms of exercise to start with include going for a walk with a pram, Nordic walking and home exercises that improve your muscle condition.

## Foods to be avoided

Certain foods should be avoided when breastfeeding due to the harmful substances contained by them. The Finnish Food Authority provides recommendations on the safe use of food items during breastfeeding. The instructions on the safe use of food items are available on the Finnish Food Authority website: <https://www.ruokavirasto.fi/en/>.

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Sources: Eating together - food recommendations for families with children. THL 2019.

Cover image: Pixabay

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