Pregnant teenagers and diet

By Jenny McLeish

Did you know that Tommy’s also provides a range of free books and leaflets for pregnant women and their families?

To find out what’s available visit www.tommys.org or call 0870 777 30 60.

We also have a pregnancy information line staffed by professional midwives from Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm: 0870 777 30 60.

Further information

www.eatwell.gov.uk:
latest health advice on a good diet during pregnancy

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk:
download leaflets on maternity services for pregnant teenagers

www.vegsoc.org/info/preg.html:
how vegetarians can achieve a balanced pregnancy diet

www.healthystart.nhs.uk:
all about the Healthy Start scheme

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Section 1: Pregnant teenagers and their food

Why pregnancy nutrition matters

The mother’s diet before and during pregnancy can have a significant impact on the development of her unborn baby.

- Inadequate diet during pregnancy is one of the main causes of low birth weight, along with smoking and inadequate pre-pregnancy weight.

Birth weight is the most important factor in whether the newborn baby survives, and low birth weight (when the baby is born weighing less than 2.5kg) is associated with an increased risk of disabilities, brain damage, poor language development, special educational needs, and in adult life coronary heart disease, hypertension and diabetes.

- Poor nutrition during pregnancy can permanently alter the baby’s blood pressure and metabolism, thus increasing the child’s long term risk of cardiovascular disease, even if birth weight is not affected.

- The babies of women who are obese (BMI of 30 or over) are at increased risk of low birth weight, non-insulin dependent diabetes and coronary heart disease.

- The babies of women who are excessively thin (BMI of 19 or less) are at increased risk of premature birth, low birth weight, coronary heart disease, non-insulin dependent diabetes and raised blood pressure.

- People living on state benefits generally eat less fruit and vegetables, less fish and less high fibre breakfast cereals than people not on benefits, but more sugar, sweets, whole milk, burgers, kebabs, pies and pasties.

Teenagers have a higher risk of poor birth outcomes.

- Teenagers are 25 per cent more likely than average to have a baby born at a low birth weight.

- Teenagers are more likely to give birth prematurely.

- The babies of teenage mothers are 60 per cent more likely to die in the first year of life than the babies of mothers in their 20s and 30s.

Why pregnant teenagers are at particular risk

Pregnant teenagers are at particular risk of having a poor quality diet both because of their age and their often disadvantaged background.

- A significant proportion of teenage girls have an inadequate intake of important nutrients, including vitamin A, folic acid, zinc, iron and calcium.

- Many teenagers have erratic and unhealthy eating patterns (such as skipping meals).

- Many teenagers are underweight at the start of pregnancy.

- Teenagers from the lowest social class (unskilled manual) are almost ten times more likely to become pregnant than teenagers from the highest social class (professional).

- Women are much more likely to have an inadequate intake of key nutrients if they are in the lowest social classes compared with those in the highest social classes.

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Why pregnant teenagers don’t eat more healthily

Dietary advice during pregnancy has tended to assume that if a pregnant woman is given a list of healthy foods to eat and foods to avoid, she will be motivated to follow this advice to do the best for her baby. However, research has shown that just giving a pregnant woman information about pregnancy diet is much more likely to increase her knowledge than to have an effect on what she actually eats.

To support a pregnant teenager effectively, it is important to understand the obstacles that she may face to changing her diet.
These may include:
• lack of money
• lack of cooking skills
• lack of budgeting, literacy and shopping skills
• lack of cooking facilities or equipment where she lives
• lack of access to shops selling fresh, affordable and high quality food
• lack of control over meals (if she lives with her family or in a residential setting)
• lack of tailored advice if she already follows a particular diet (e.g. vegetarian)

The cost of an adequate diet
Research has shown that women who are dependent on means-tested benefits can find it difficult to follow an adequate pregnancy diet.\(^1\)

To eat a ‘modest but adequate’ diet that meets all the nutritional requirements for pregnancy, women need to set aside a large proportion of the income support received per week. Instead however, money for food is often used as the ‘elastic’ item in a tight budget – it is whatever is left over when the non-negotiable bills such as utilities have been paid. Research into the diets of pregnant women on income support found that they were spending only 64 percent of the amount recommended for a ‘modest but adequate’ diet. In 2007, this was just £2.57 a day.\(^2\)

When money is short, the logical response is to buy cheap calories, which are found in fatty foods that are often high in salt and sugar. In terms of calories per penny, chips are about half the price of carrots. A diet of biscuits, sweet tea, white bread, hard margarine and processed meat products can provide all the calories needed at an affordable price.\(^3\) But these calories are largely ‘empty’ – they provide energy but lack essential nutrients.

Buying healthier food options (such as lean mince or wholemeal bread) costs on average 50 per cent more than less healthy alternatives.\(^4\) In addition, local corner shops can be up to 60 per cent more expensive than supermarkets, and in less affluent areas these shops are particularly unlikely to stock healthier options such as semi-skimmed milk, fresh fruit and vegetables.\(^5\) However, a trip to the supermarket may be uneconomic because of the cost of the bus fares or (if there is too much to carry) the taxi fare home.

Help with a good diet: Healthy Start

What is Healthy Start?
Healthy Start is a scheme that provides food vouchers and free vitamins to qualifying pregnant women and families with children under the age of four. All pregnant women who are under the age of 18 at the time of applying, qualify for Healthy Start, whether or not they are on benefits. Older pregnant women (and children under four) qualify for Healthy Start if they, or their families, are on:
• Income Support
• income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance or
• Child Tax Credit, without Working Tax Credit (unless Working Tax Credit run-on only is in payment) and an annual family income of £15,575 (2008/9) or less.

A woman can apply for Healthy Start as soon as she is ten weeks pregnant.
If a pregnant young woman is under 18, she should also provide information on the Healthy Start application form about any benefits/tax credits she is receiving. This is important because if there is no record on the Healthy Start database that she receives benefits, the Healthy Start vouchers will stop arriving at the baby’s due date, or as soon as they know the baby has been born. However, if they know the young woman receives benefits they will continue to send one voucher a week until she confirms that her baby has been born, and they will then send two vouchers a week until the baby is one year old. For the same reason, if the young woman applies for Healthy Start vouchers on the grounds that she is under 18 and then also begins to receive benefits later in pregnancy, she should call the Healthy Start helpline to let them know.

What do pregnant women get with Healthy Start?
Once on the scheme, pregnant women and families with young children get their vouchers through the post every four weeks. Each voucher is worth £3 and can be spent on milk, fresh fruit, and fresh vegetables. Vouchers can also be put towards the cost of infant formula if they are for a baby that is not being breastfed.

Pregnant women, new mothers and children under four supported by Healthy Start can also claim free Healthy Start vitamin supplements every eight weeks. The supplement for pregnant women and new mothers contains vitamins C, D and folic acid. Primary Care Trusts and Health Boards are responsible for making Healthy Start vitamin supplements available, for example:
• through health clinics from reception staff
• through children’s centres
• directly from health care professionals or
• through an arrangement with an agent such as a local pharmacy.

Find your nearest outlet and guide the pregnant teenager to take the letter confirming that she qualifies for Healthy Start. Healthy Start vitamin supplements are available in a wide range of outlets, such as a local pharmacy.

For more information about Healthy Start see www.healthystart.nhs.uk
Healthy Start helpline: 0845 607 6823

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Talking to pregnant teenagers about food

Talking to a young pregnant woman about changing her diet stands the best chance of success if the advice is:

- personal – to the teenager herself, her concerns and her abilities
- relevant – to her age, culture and existing diet
- realistic – fully understanding any obstacles she may face to making changes, and not too ambitious
- practical – helping her to find ways around those obstacles to achieve specific improvements
- grounded – in a relationship of trust and respect.

Eight steps to to effective communication about diet in pregnancy

Step 1: Listen carefully

The foundation of giving realistic and personal advice is to listen to the young woman and what she thinks is important. For example: What would she like to eat more/less of? Is she experiencing morning sickness? Does she have any particular worries (such as gaining weight)? Does she have any particular issues that she feels prevent her from achieving a better diet?

Step 2: Ask the young woman what she normally eats

Find out
- what she likes and dislikes eating
- whether she follows a particular diet (such as vegetarian)
- whether she regularly skips breakfast or other meals.

A simple way to get an overview of what she eats is to ask the young woman to do a 24-hour recall – that is, to tell you everything she ate and drank the previous day. You can prompt her memory with questions, such as:

- 'What was the first thing you ate or drank when you got up?'
- 'Did you have a snack in the morning?'
- 'What did you have for your midday meal?'
- 'Did you eat or drink anything when you came home from school/college?'
- 'Did you eat or drink anything while you were out?'
- 'What did you eat or drink in the evening?'

Be careful to remain non-judgemental in both words and body language. No one likes to be judged or criticised for their weight, diet or lifestyle and if the young woman feels defensive she is more likely to tell you what she thinks you want to hear.

Step 3: Give positive feedback

Emphasise the positive: find something to praise in the young woman’s current diet or way of managing in difficult circumstances. Many young women who become pregnant do not have much experience of success and praise, and may lack the self-confidence to take control of choices such as diet. Positive feedback can help to develop self-belief.

Step 4: Focus your information on a few key points

Young women often feel bombarded by a long list of ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ when they are pregnant. It’s very difficult to take in masses of new information at the same time.

Instead, focus on just a few key points that will be easier to remember (unless she asks for more information). The key points should be simple and specific. They should relate to what you have learned about the young woman’s current diet – what are the most important gaps?

Explain the specific benefits of the changes you are suggesting, in terms that will make sense to that young woman and appeal to her.

Advice is easier to understand if you talk to the young woman about meals or snacks, rather than nutrients.

Step 5: Help the young woman to set small, achievable goals

A realistic goal is one that can be integrated into the young woman’s lifestyle, rather than requiring major lifestyle changes. It should take account of her cooking skills and facilities, financial situation and access to shops.

Goals need to be clearly defined and specific. Rather than having a general intention to eat better, the young woman is much more likely to change her diet if she has a specific plan.

For example:
- I’ll eat breakfast every day this week.
- I’ll eat a piece of fruit as a morning snack at least three times this week.

Section 2: tommys.org Pregnant teenagers and diet
• I'll buy four low-fat yoghurts this week and eat them at the end of a meal.
• I'll try a vegetable I've never had before this week.
• I'll treat myself to crisps but I'll check the labels and find the brand lowest in salt and fat.
• I'll take my Healthy Start vitamins every day this week.

Not everyone is ready to sign up to a goal, but goals can be very motivating, and achieving them contributes to self-esteem and self-confidence. A young woman who is very reluctant to change her diet may be willing to set a goal of ‘just trying’ something to see how it works.

Step 6: Help the young woman in a problem-solving approach

There may be specific obstacles to the young woman achieving her goals. Listen to the difficulties she perceives.

Think of your role as a guide, empowering the young woman’s own problem solving. She is more likely to stick to a small, achievable solution that is her own, than a larger one which is yours. Brainstorm with her if she can’t think of any solutions.

Defuse anxiety by reassuring the young woman that many people face similar difficulties and sharing what has worked for others.

Step 7: Use leaflets wisely

Don’t overload the young woman with leaflets (unless she wants them), and remember that many young women who become pregnant have below-average literacy skills. The young woman’s guide to pregnancy, published by Tommy’s, is a comprehensive free resource designed specifically for pregnant teenagers that covers all aspects of pregnancy, including diet. To order copies, call 08707 70 70 70.

Don’t make a leaflet the focus of your advice: the young woman should be the focus, and a leaflet should just be a reminder.

Personalise leaflets (for example by marking relevant parts).

Step 8: Refer the young woman to other sources of support

Check that the young woman is receiving Healthy Start vouchers and vitamins (even if she is not eligible for Healthy Start, she can still buy the Healthy Start vitamins).

Refer her to a dietitian if appropriate and available.

Refer her to any local groups or classes on cooking and nutrition.

Remind the young woman that Healthy Start vouchers are there to help her buy fruit, vegetables and/or milk. Ask her what she will buy with the vouchers.

Problem solving with a pregnant teenager

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>She might say...</th>
<th>You could say...</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruit and veg are so expensive!</td>
<td>Some fresh fruit and vegetables are expensive, but different ones are cheaper at different times of the year when they’re in season. Local markets and some local shops can be cheaper. Tinned or frozen fruit and vegetables are healthy and often cheaper than fresh. Use Healthy Start vouchers to buy fruit, vegetables and milk if you’re under 18, or over 18 and getting Income Support or income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t like vegetables</td>
<td>Try eating different kinds of fruits instead. Try stirring small amounts of vegetables, chopped small, into sauces or stews. You won’t even notice they’re there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t do the cooking at home.</td>
<td>Even if it’s not up to you what meals are made, you can still use your Healthy Start vouchers to buy fruit for snacks. Talk to the person who does the cooking about the kinds of food you need while you are pregnant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m living alone for the first time and I don’t know how to cook.</td>
<td>Don’t be scared of cooking – it doesn’t have to be fancy. You can get really easy recipes in cookbooks from the library or the internet. Dishes such as beans on wholemeal toast are simple to put together. Let’s find out if there are any learn-to-cook sessions locally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My money has always run out by the end of the fortnight.</td>
<td>If you keep your money as cash, try putting it into envelopes and write: ‘Next week’s food for the baby and me’ on it. Look out for special offers in the shops, such as ‘two for the price of one’ on tinned or frozen vegetables.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
She might say...

I live in a hostel and the kitchen is disgusting.

You could say...

If you have nowhere to cook or everyone else is getting takeaways or ready meals, make the best of it.
• Don’t always choose chips.
• Don’t ask for extra toppings on your burger.
• Choose pizzas without extra cheese or pepperoni but that do have vegetables or ham toppings.
• Look out for ready meals that contain vegetables.
• Read the labels on food in packages – for example, some crisps are much less salty and fatty than others.

I only have a microwave and a kettle.

I want to eat with my friends and they all like takeaways.

I don’t want to gain lots of weight.

What is a healthy diet for pregnancy?

A healthy diet for pregnancy is essentially a normal, balanced, varied diet, with some minor adjustments.

This section looks at the current recommendations for foods to eat and foods to avoid during pregnancy. The latest advice can also be found on www.eatwell.gov.uk

Foods to eat

A pregnant teenager should try to eat foods from each of these main groups every day:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of food</th>
<th>Why?</th>
<th>Amount to eat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods</td>
<td>These are packed with energy and provide fibre and protein.</td>
<td>They should make up the main part of every meal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(wholegrain versions are best)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or</td>
<td>These are full of essential vitamins, minerals and fibre.</td>
<td>Try to eat at least five portions of different fruits and vegetables a day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>a glass of juice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, fish, eggs and beans</td>
<td>These provide protein, which is vital for the growth of the baby as it builds new tissue for bones, muscles and organs, and they are a good source of iron.</td>
<td>Try to eat these once or twice a day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk and dairy foods (including cheese and yoghurt)</td>
<td>These provide calcium and vitamin D – needed for strong bones and healthy teeth.</td>
<td>Try to eat these once or twice a day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eating well

The basic ‘positive’ messages to give a pregnant teenager are:

• Eating as well as you can manage during pregnancy helps to give your baby the best possible start.
• Try to eat a variety of foods every day.
• Healthy Start vouchers can help you to buy fruit, vegetables and milk while you are pregnant.

Remember to use your Healthy Start vouchers to buy fruit for snacks.

Remember to take your Healthy Start vitamins every day!
**Important vitamins and minerals for pregnancy**

As well as eating a variety of foods, there are some vitamins and minerals that are particularly important during pregnancy. Healthy Start vitamins provide folic acid, vitamin C and vitamin D.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Nutrient</th>
<th>How to get it</th>
<th>Why it matters</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Folic acid</strong></td>
<td>Healthy Start vitamin tablets; green leafy vegetables, brown rice, fortified cereals (cereals with added vitamins and minerals). (It is very difficult to get enough folate, the natural form of folic acid, by diet alone.)</td>
<td>Taking a daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid before conception and until the twelfth week of pregnancy significantly reduces the risk of neural tube defects in babies, such as spina bifida. It is important to keep taking folic acid throughout pregnancy, because research has found that teenagers who have a low folate status and a low intake of folate are more likely to have low birth weight babies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vitamin D</strong></td>
<td>Healthy Start vitamin tablets; summer sunlight on the skin; oily fish, fortified margarine and breakfast cereals. (It is very difficult to get enough vitamin D by diet or sunlight alone.)</td>
<td>Vitamin D helps the body to absorb calcium. Lack of vitamin D can affect the mother and baby's bones and increase the risk of the child developing rickets or other bone problems. Many teenagers are deficient in vitamin D. Women are at particular risk of being deficient in vitamin D if they have limited skin exposure to sunlight (for example because of cultural restrictions), are of south Asian, African, Caribbean or Middle Eastern descent, or are obese.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vitamin C</strong></td>
<td>Healthy Start vitamin tablets; many fruits and vegetables – including citrus fruit.</td>
<td>Vitamin C helps protect the body's cells and keeps them healthy, and aids the absorption of iron into the body.</td>
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<td><strong>Iron</strong> (not routinely recommended to pregnant women – should only be taken on the advice from GP)</td>
<td>Red meat, beans, nuts, dried fruit, whole grains (such as brown rice), fortified breakfast cereals and most dark green leafy vegetables.</td>
<td>Iron has a number of important roles in the body. For example it helps make red blood cells, which carry oxygen around the body. Anaemia (lack of iron) is very common among pregnant teenagers and can affect the baby's brain development. It can also lead to infection or haemorrhage after birth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Calcium</strong> (not routinely recommended to pregnant women – should only be taken on the advice from GP)</td>
<td>Milk, cheese, yoghurt, tofu, green leafy vegetables and pulses.</td>
<td>Calcium is needed for building strong bones, both in the developing baby and the growing teenage mother. Although the body becomes more efficient at absorbing calcium when pregnant, teenagers are at risk of calcium deficiency because many do not eat sufficient calcium-rich foods.</td>
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</table>

Foods to avoid

**The basic ‘negative’ messages to give are:**

- It’s a good idea to keep foods and drinks with lots of fat or sugar for treats only – otherwise the pregnant teenager could gain extra weight that’s hard to lose afterwards. ‘On the other hand if they eat well, they will still gain weight as the baby grows, but that weight is not difficult to lose after the birth, especially if they breastfeed the baby’.
- There are also some foods that it’s best to avoid during pregnancy, usually because there is a risk of food poisoning or catching an infection that could seriously harm the baby.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foods to avoid</th>
<th>Reason for avoiding</th>
<th>Food to eat instead</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raw or undercooked meat – especially burgers, sausages and chicken</td>
<td>Risk of toxoplasmosis – a tiny parasite that lives in raw meat and cat poo and can harm the baby.</td>
<td>Well-cooked meat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpasteurised milk (all milk sold in shops, supermarkets and restaurants in the UK is pasteurised)</td>
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<td>Pasteurised milk and yoghurt.</td>
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</table>
### Foods to avoid

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<td>Liver</td>
<td>Contains too much vitamin A – high levels can harm the baby.</td>
<td>Any other well-cooked red meat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paté</td>
<td>Risk of listeria – a bug that can harm the baby.</td>
<td>Slices of cooked ham.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cheese with blue veins (such as Stilton or Danish Blue)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other cheeses such as cheddar cheese, cottage cheese and cheese spreads (Philadelphia for example).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mould-ripened cheese (such as Brie, Camembert and others with a similar rind)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undercooked ready meals</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ready meals that are reheated until hot all the way through (follow the instructions on the packs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw eggs or eggs cooked with a runny yolk</td>
<td>Risk of salmonella, a common cause of food poisoning that can harm the baby.</td>
<td>Hard-boiled eggs (yolk should be hard all the way through), eggs used in baking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw shellfish</td>
<td>Risk of food poisoning.</td>
<td>Cooked shellfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than four medium cans of tuna a week</td>
<td>These fish can contain high levels of mercury, which can be harmful to a baby’s developing nervous system.</td>
<td>All other fish types eg cod, haddock. Less than two portions of oily fish or four medium cans of tuna a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than two portions of fresh oily fish (fresh tuna, mackerel, sardines or trout) a week</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shark, swordfish or marlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peanuts and peanut-based products if the mother or the baby’s dad has allergies such as eczema, asthma or hayfever</td>
<td>This may reduce the chances of the baby suffering a nut allergy.</td>
<td>All other nuts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much caffeine – pregnant women should limit their caffeine intake to no more than 300gm a day (roughly three mugs of instant coffee, six cups of tea or eight cans of cola)</td>
<td>Caffeine is a stimulant; it increases the heart rate and metabolism, which in turn affects the developing baby. High levels of caffeine are also linked to an increased risk of low birthweight and miscarriage.</td>
<td>Juice, milk, water and tea/coffee under the limit advised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplements with vitamin A</td>
<td>Pregnant women need some vitamin A, but too much means that levels could build up and may harm the unborn baby.</td>
<td>Healthy Start vitamins and supplements not containing vitamin A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### References

28. www.eatwell.gov.uk
29. www.eatwell.gov.uk
32. www.eatwell.gov.uk
33. www.eatwell.gov.uk

### Acknowledgments

Supported by a financial contribution from the Teenage Pregnancy Unit in the Department of Children, Schools and Families.

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Design: Navig8 www.navig8.co.uk