



# Fact sheet

Centre for Community Child Health

## Reducing the risk of developing food allergy

Parents hear and read an increasing amount about serious food allergy these days. It's not simply media chatter; data show that severe food allergy is on the rise in Australia and other developed nations, particularly in young children. However, there are steps that parents and caregivers can take to reduce the risk of children developing a serious food allergy.

### Food allergy and food intolerance

Food allergy and food intolerance are often confused with each other, but are actually quite different.

An *allergic reaction* to food is when the body's immune system responds to a food as though it's a threat.

An *intolerance* to food is any reaction to food that is not an immune response.

It's important to make the distinction between food allergy and food intolerance. While an intolerance can make people feel very sick and uncomfortable, food allergy can endanger lives.

### What can families do to reduce the risk of food allergy?

We do not know how to stop food allergies developing or completely eliminate the risk of them developing. However, there are steps that allergists at The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne recommend as safe and easy ways to reduce the risk of developing food allergies.

### Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding babies for at least the first six months of life has many benefits for you and your child, but might also help prevent food allergy developing. Keep breastfeeding alongside introducing solid food.

### Start solids at about six months

Based on the available evidence, allergists at The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne recommend starting solid foods from around six months.

### Get a bit grotty

Let children play in the dirt and get a bit dirty, and avoid using anti-bacterial cleaners on kitchen surfaces. Letting children be exposed to 'good bugs' could help to protect against the development of food allergy.

### Get some sun

Recent research has suggested that low vitamin D levels are connected to an increased risk of food allergy.

The best way to get vitamin D is to expose our skin to the sun.

There are no guidelines for sun exposure that apply to children, but for fair-skinned adults the recommendation is six to eight minutes exposure without sunscreen, around four to six times a week. Dark-skinned people will need more time, around 15 minutes. About 15 per cent of the skin's surface needs to be exposed for this amount of time - that can mean hands, face and arms. These guidelines apply before 10am and after 2pm in the summer months.

The sun's strength varies dramatically across the country depending on season, climate and latitude. Sun Smart provides daily advice for your local area

[www.sunsmart.com.au/vitamin-d/tracker-tool](http://www.sunsmart.com.au/vitamin-d/tracker-tool)

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## COMMUNITY PAEDIATRIC REVIEW

# Good mental health for mothers – Bupa Health Foundation partnerships

**Good mental health has a profound impact on women's lives and the lives of their children. The Bupa Health Foundation has partnered in a number of initiatives helping to support the mental health of pregnant women and mothers.**

Supporting mothers to look after their mental health is a focus for the Parent and Infant Research Institute, Austin Health in Victoria. Professor Jeannette Milgrom and her team are exploring the impact of a depression treatment program for pregnant women. Using cognitive behavioural therapy, the Beating the Blues Before Birth program aims to help mothers to develop effective coping skills. It also provides information and support to partners so they have an opportunity to become involved in the therapeutic process.

Similarly, a study from St John of God Health Care and University of NSW is looking at the impact of an early intervention approach to perinatal mental health on service utilisation and health outcomes in mothers. Professor Marie-Paule Austin is using data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health to see how effective routine screening of pregnant women is in finding and preventing mental health problems. She said 'if you promptly

identify and treat these conditions, you can stop them becoming chronic, with major implications for mother-infant bonding. Untreated maternal depression can also put the emotional wellbeing of the next generation at risk. You can greatly reduce costs by getting in early.'

Early findings show around one in five mothers report feeling sad, anxious and stressed both during and after pregnancy. However, around one in three women reported that they were not asked about their emotional wellbeing during health consultations in the perinatal phase.

Research conducted by the Woolcock Institute is looking to see if sleep interventions during pregnancy can reduce symptoms of depression in first-time mothers. Clinical Associate Professor Delwyn Bartlett and her team are trialling a sleep education program that includes cognitive behavioural therapy to try to reduce the risks of post-natal depression. Their program aims to enable prospective parents to better understand the changes in sleep that occur with pregnancy and the birth of their baby and to develop more realistic expectations of the process of parenthood in relation to sleep and mood.

The Bupa Health Foundation is committed to improving the health of the Australian community and the sustainability of the health system. Too often, good ideas never get the chance to make a difference. The Bupa Health Foundation, with its partnerships in health research and practice, aims to put that right.

Established as a charitable foundation in 2005, the Bupa Health Foundation has partnered in over 80 initiatives nationally, with a combined investment of around \$19 million, across its key focus areas: promoting wellness; managing chronic disease; healthy ageing; empowering people about their health; and promoting affordable healthcare.

[www.bupa.com.au/foundation](http://www.bupa.com.au/foundation)

