‘Proteins hold key to healthy babies’

Bengaluru researchers estimate nutritional requirement for pregnant women

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“Eating for two” is a common way women look at nourishment all through pregnancy. Now a study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition shows that a diet with relatively more protein is needed during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy for the growth and development of the baby.

To accurately estimate the daily protein requirement in pregnant Indian women, a whole-body potassium counting instrument was built at St. John’s Research Institute in Bengaluru, with financial support from the Centre’s Department of Biotechnology.

This facility was used to arrive at estimates of protein requirements in 38 urban, well-nourished, middle class Indian pregnant women, who had normal pregnancies and delivered babies of an average birth weight of three kg.

Month by month
For a gestational weight gain of 10 kg, pregnant Indian women should eat an additional 7.6 grams and 17.6 grams of protein per day during the second (3 - 6 months) and third trimester (6-9 months) respectively, the researchers found.

Rebecca Kuriyan Raj, head of the division of nutrition at St. John’s Research Institute, who is the lead author of the study, said that in conjunction with the energy requirement during the same periods of pregnancy (about an additional 350 kCal/day), it is clear that the extra food that a pregnant woman must eat should be high quality, in terms of its protein content such as milk and milk products, dals, rice and dal blends, eggs, fish and meat.

The Centre’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme provides supplementary nutrition services for children (6 months - 6 years) and pregnant and lactating women.

As a part of the service, food supplements of 600 calories and 18-20 grams of protein/day are provided in the form of micro nutrient fortified food and/or take home ration to the pregnant women.

“The amount of 600 calories provided may, however, be high for some women and if the pregnant woman does not eat the entire amount allotted to her, it is likely that her protein intake may not be adequate and those requirements will not be met,” Prof. Raj said.

“Rather than focussing on large amounts of cereals and calories, it is important to include combinations of high protein foods such as milk, dal and egg in the meals provided to the pregnant women,” she added.