

Why is being ready for pregnancy so important?

Conception occurs about 2 weeks before your period is due. That means you may not even know you're pregnant until you're more than 3 weeks pregnant. Yet your baby is most sensitive to harm 2 to 8 weeks after conception. This is when your baby's facial features and organs, such as the heart and kidneys, begin to form. Anything you eat, drink, smoke or are exposed to can affect your baby. That's why it's best to start acting as if you're pregnant before you are.

When should I talk with my doctor about pregnancy?

Any time--even before you're thinking about getting pregnant. You can talk about your diet, habits, lifestyle and any concerns you have. Plan on visiting your doctor within a year before you want to get pregnant. At that time, you may be given a physical check-up. You and the father-to-be will probably be asked about your medical history. You'll both also have the chance to ask your doctor questions.

What should I eat?

What you eat will also feed your baby. Junk food like potato chips, soda and cookies won't have the right nutrients for your baby. You might also need to make some changes if you follow a vegetarian or weight-loss diet. Talk to your doctor before taking extra vitamins and minerals. Some of them may be harmful, like high doses of vitamin A.

Folic Acid Alert

Women who don't get enough folic acid during pregnancy are more likely to have a baby with serious problems of the brain or spinal cord. It's important to take folic acid before becoming pregnant because these problems develop very early in pregnancy--only 3 to 4 weeks after conception. Women need about 0.4 mg of folic acid a day. You can take a multivitamin or eat plenty of green, leafy vegetables, oranges, cantaloupe, bananas, milk, grains and organ meats (such as chicken livers).

What about weight?

If you're overweight, your risk during pregnancy is higher for things such as high blood pressure and diabetes. You may also be less comfortable during pregnancy, and your labor may be longer. You can use the time before getting pregnant to lose weight if you need to.

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Is exercise okay?

Yes. The more fit you are, the easier your pregnancy and delivery may be. But if you exercise too much, it can make getting pregnant harder. And overdoing it once you're pregnant can be dangerous. If you haven't been exercising, start before you get pregnant. While you are pregnant, you can probably keep up a

light exercise program. Walking every day is good exercise. Talk to your doctor about an exercise plan for you.

Do I need to change my habits?

Using tobacco, alcohol or drugs can cause serious harm to your baby and can even cause miscarriage. If you use tobacco, alcohol or drugs, get help from your doctor to quit. He or she will want to help you find a way to stop.

Smoking. Smoking can cause miscarriage, bleeding, premature birth and low birth weight. It's also linked to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), in which infants suddenly die of no obvious cause. Children of smokers may do less well on IQ tests, and their physical growth may be slower.

Alcohol. Drinking by a pregnant woman can cause fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). FAS can lead to many problems, including mental slowness, poor growth, defects of the face and a head that is too small. Drink no alcohol or as little as possible before and during pregnancy.

Illegal drugs. Using marijuana, cocaine and other illegal drugs raises the chances of miscarriage, premature birth and birth defects. With some drugs, the child will be born addicted to the drug that the mother used and will go through withdrawal.

The Hazards of Heat

Soaking in a hot tub could hurt your baby if you're in the first trimester of pregnancy. Some research has shown that high heat--from a fever, hot bath or hot tub--during the first 3 months may cause birth defects.

Am I around things at work or home that could be harmful?

Maybe. Some dangers include radiation, heavy metals like lead, copper and mercury, carbon disulfide, acids, and anesthetic gases. The radiation from computer screens doesn't seem to be harmful.

Talk with your doctor about your workplace and home to find out if there are any dangers. If anything could harm your baby at work, you may be able to use special clothing or equipment to protect your baby, or you may be able to get a short-term transfer before and during pregnancy.

Cats and Toxoplasmosis

You may have heard that pregnant women shouldn't clean a cat's litter box. That's because a parasite that causes a disease called toxoplasmosis can be spread through the feces of cats. Toxoplasmosis isn't usually harmful to children and adults, but it can cause birth defects, including blindness and brain damage. You can also get toxoplasmosis by eating raw or undercooked red meat or touching dirt, such as when gardening, that has been contaminated by cat feces.

What about medicines I take?

Both prescription and over-the-counter medicines can affect your baby. Ask your doctor before taking prescription or nonprescription (like aspirin) medicines.

If you need to take medicine often because of health problems, such as asthma, epilepsy, thyroid problems or migraine headaches, talk with your doctor about your treatment and any risks during pregnancy.

What tests may I need before I get pregnant?

You may need some tests to find out if you have problems that could harm you or your baby during pregnancy. Many things can be handled before pregnancy to help prevent problems for your baby and for you.

Rubella. If you don't know whether you've ever had rubella (German measles) or been vaccinated against it, a blood test can give the answer. Catching rubella while you're pregnant can be very bad for your baby. You can be vaccinated before you get pregnant.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). STDs such as gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia and AIDS can make it hard for you to get pregnant and can also harm you or your baby. It is best if these infections are diagnosed and treated before pregnancy.

Other problems. Your doctor may also want to do some other tests depending on if you're at risk for other problems, such as anemia or hepatitis.

What if I have health problems?

Diabetes, high blood pressure or problems with your circulation may need extra care during pregnancy. It's often easier to treat problems or get them under control before you're pregnant.

Will my baby be at risk for genetic problems?

Your baby may be at risk for certain problems that run in your family. These are genetic diseases. Cystic fibrosis and sickle cell anemia are some examples. These problems aren't caused by anything you do. Talk with your doctor about your risk factors and whether screening tests are needed.