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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Prenatal Care

What is prenatal care?

Prenatal care means health care during your pregnancy before your baby is born. Take care of yourself and your baby by:

- Getting **early** prenatal care. If you know you are pregnant, or think you might be pregnant, call your health care provider as soon as possible and schedule a visit.
- Getting **regular** prenatal care. Follow your health care provider's schedule for visits and don't miss appointments.
- Doing everything you can to keep yourself and your baby healthy during your pregnancy.

Why is prenatal care so important?

Prenatal care is important because, by seeing you regularly, your health care provider has the chance to find problems early so that they can be treated as soon as possible. Other problems might also be prevented. Many studies have shown that early and regular prenatal care is important for the health of both mothers and their babies.

I am thinking about getting pregnant. How can I take care of myself?

Taking care of yourself *before* you get pregnant helps you have a healthy pregnancy and lowers your chances of having a baby born with a birth defect.

Here are ways to take care of yourself before you get pregnant:

- Eat healthy foods, exercise regularly (30 minutes per day for most days of the week is best), and get enough rest and sleep. Talk to your health care provider about what kinds of food and exercise are best for you.
- Take 400 micrograms (mcg) of *folic acid* (one of the B vitamins) every day. The best way to do this is to take a daily multivitamin pill that contains this amount of folic acid. Getting enough of the synthetic (manufactured) form of folic acid every day before you get pregnant and during early pregnancy can help prevent certain birth defects. Many breakfast cereals and other grain products have folic acid added to them, but only certain cereals contain 400 mcg of folic acid per serving. Check the label on your multivitamin or cereal to find the amount of folic acid in the food.

- See your health care provider for a complete check up. Make sure that you have had all your shots, especially for *rubella* (German measles). Rubella can cause serious birth defects. Chickenpox is another illness you want to avoid during pregnancy. If you have had chickenpox and rubella in the past, you should be immune to them.
- Tell your health care provider about any prescription or nonprescription medicines (including herbal remedies) you are taking. Some medicines are not safe to take during pregnancy.
 - Stop smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or taking drugs. Ask your health care provider for help. You can also get help with alcohol and drugs by talking with a member of your faith community, a counselor, or a trusted friend.

I just found out that I am pregnant. How can I take care of myself?

Here are ways to take care of yourself and the precious new life growing inside you:

- Continue taking your multivitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day.
- Get early and regular prenatal care. It doesn't matter if this is your first pregnancy or if you already have children—it is really important to see a health care provider during your pregnancy. Your health care provider will check at each visit to make sure that you and the baby are healthy. If there are any problems, action can be taken right away to help you and the baby.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, grains and calcium-rich foods. Choose foods low in saturated fat.
- Unless your health care provider tells you not to, try to be physically active for 30 minutes, most days of the week. If you are pressed for time, you can get your activity in through 10 minute segments, three times a day.
- If you smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs, STOP. These can cause long-term damage to your baby. Talk with your health care provider about steps to take to stop smoking. Talk with a member of your faith community, a counselor, a trusted friend, or your health care provider if you are concerned about your alcohol or drug use.
- Ask your health care provider before taking any medicine, even over-the-counter medicines. Some medicines are not safe to take during pregnancy.
- Avoid hot tubs or saunas and x-rays during pregnancy.
- Do not empty the cat litter when you are pregnant. It may contain a parasite that causes an infection called *toxoplasmosis*, which can cause birth defects. Also, use gloves when working in garden areas used by cats.
- Don't eat uncooked or undercooked meats or fish.

- Stay away from toxic chemicals like insecticides, solvents (like some cleaners or paint thinners), lead, and mercury. Most dangerous household products will have pregnancy warnings on their labels. Ask your health care provider about products if you are unsure.
- Limit or eliminate your caffeine intake from coffee, tea, sodas, medications, and chocolate.
- Many women continue working through pregnancy. Staying active might help you stay healthier. If you have a question about the safety of your particular job, talk with your health care provider.
- Get informed. Read books, watch videos, go to a childbirth class, and talk with experienced moms.
- Ask your health care provider about childbirth education classes for you and your partner. Classes can help you prepare for the birth of your baby.

I am not thinking about getting pregnant right now, but heard that all women should take folic acid every day?

All women of childbearing age, with even a remote chance of getting pregnant, should try to make sure they get enough folic acid. The reason is that many pregnancies are not planned. Many women don't know they are actually pregnant early in their pregnancies, and certain birth defects happen in the very early part of pregnancy. Taking 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day will help prevent certain birth defects that happen in the early part of pregnancy. If a woman begins taking vitamin pills in the second or third month of pregnancy, it may be too late to prevent birth defects. Folic acid may also have other health benefits for women besides preventing birth defects.

How often should I see my doctor during pregnancy?

Your health care provider will give you a schedule for your prenatal visits. You will have visits more often as you get closer to the end of your pregnancy. An average pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks. A typical schedule includes visiting your health care provider:

- about once each month during your first six months of pregnancy, then
- every two weeks during the next two months, and then
- weekly until the delivery date.

If you are over 35 or your pregnancy is high risk because you have certain health problems (like diabetes or high blood pressure), your health care provider will probably want to see you more often.

What happens during prenatal visits?

At your first prenatal visit, your health care provider will talk to you about your health history and your family health history and do a physical exam. The physical exam will include checks of your blood pressure, height and weight, and an exam of your pelvic organs. There will be tests of your blood and urine. Your health care provider will be able to tell you when to expect that your baby will be born. This visit is also a chance for you to learn about staying healthy during pregnancy.

At your later prenatal visits, your health care provider will check how you are doing and how the baby is developing. You may have a number of tests done as your pregnancy progresses. Ultrasound exams are often used to check on the baby's growth and health. You may have more urine and blood tests as well as special tests if needed. Visit our "Healthy Pregnancy" pages on the NWHIC web site www.4woman.gov for more information on prenatal care and pregnancy.

I am in my late thirties and I want to have a child now. Should I do anything special?

As you get older, there is more chance of having a baby born with a birth defect. However, most women in their late thirties and early forties have healthy babies. See your health care provider on a regular basis before you get pregnant and be sure to go for exams throughout your pregnancy. Your health care provider probably will want to do some special tests to check on your baby's health.

Women today are often delaying having children until later in life, when they are in their thirties and forties. While many women in their thirties and forties have no difficulty getting pregnant, fertility does decline with age. For women over 40 who cannot get pregnant after six months of trying, it is recommended that they see their health care provider for a fertility evaluation. It is not uncommon to have trouble becoming pregnant or experience infertility (inability to become pregnant after trying for one year). If you think that you or your partner may be infertile, you can discuss this with your health care provider who can recommend treatments such as drugs, surgery, or assisted reproductive technology.

For more information...

You can find out more about prenatal care by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-WOMAN (9662) or the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

Phone Number(s): (770) 488-7150, (888) 232-6789

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/>

Smart Moms, Healthy Babies

Phone Numbers(s): (734) 936-4000

Internet Address: <http://www.smartmoms.org/>

March of Dimes

Phone Number(s): (914) 428-7100, (888) 663-4637

Internet Address: <http://www.modimes.org/>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264 x 192 (for publications requests only)

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org/>

American Academy of Family Physicians

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.aafp.org/>

The Nemours Foundation

Phone Number(s): (302) 651-4046

Internet Address: <http://www.nemours.org/no/>

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