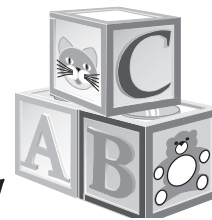


You and Your Baby

Planning for a Healthy Baby



Whether you are planning to have a baby in the near future or are pregnant already, you can take several steps toward good health for your baby. Early pregnancy is very important to a baby's development. Any woman of childbearing age is wise to consider the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy and practice good health habits before conception.

Pre-pregnancy Check-up

A pre-pregnancy visit to the ob/gyn or family practice doctor is a good way to plan for a healthy baby. Tell your doctor you may become pregnant in the near future and would like to discuss how to improve your chances of having a healthy baby. Here are some things your visit should include:

- Discussion about medical history, medications, past pregnancies, work, hobbies, and lifestyle.
- Time to ask questions about any of your concerns.
- Screening tests for immunity to rubella (German measles), Hepatitis B, and varicella (chicken pox). If you are not immune to these diseases, you can delay conception and get vaccinations/shots before pregnancy.
- Screening tests for infections such as sexually transmitted diseases and vaginal and urinary infections so they can be treated (and minimize risks to your baby).
- Evaluation and treatment of any chronic illnesses such as diabetes, asthma, seizure disorders, and high blood pressure.

Before becoming pregnant, you may be able to find out if your baby will be at higher risk for many specific inherited diseases such as Tay-Sachs disease, thalassemia, and sickle-cell disease. Not every couple

needs these expensive tests, but for some the screening tests and genetic counseling can provide helpful information and reassurance.

Healthy Habits

Regular exercise and a healthy diet are important for prenatal health. Ideally, you will have these good health habits before you become pregnant. Seriously overweight women face additional health risks for themselves and their babies.

- Prenatal vitamins can protect your health and provide for the needs of a developing baby. Ask your doctor to recommend one to take before you become pregnant and during pregnancy.
- The March of Dimes recommends that all women who could become pregnant take a multi-vitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day to help prevent birth defects of the brain and spine.
- Dieting for weight loss is not healthy during pregnancy.
- Pregnancy and a diet of certain fish don't mix. The Food and Drug Administration advises pregnant women not to eat several types of large saltwater fish because the fish contain enough mercury to damage a developing brain. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also advises child-bearing women to protect against the risk of mercury in some freshwater fish. For more information, contact your county Extension office.
- Some pediatricians are now recommending that pregnant women and nursing mothers avoid peanuts and peanut products to reduce the chances of life-threatening peanut allergies in their children.



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Lifestyle and Behaviors

Lifestyle concerns may include environmental exposure to toxic chemicals or heavy metals and the use of caffeine, alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. While it is not possible to predict which pregnancies will be affected, the results of these exposures can be devastating and unnecessary. Consider the following to reduce risk to your baby:

- Your workplace activities or hobbies can cause brain damage if they involve contact with lead, mercury, or other heavy metals.
- Chemicals used without proper protection can easily reach the fetus.
- Women who are trying to conceive should avoid using hot tubs, saunas, and very hot tub baths, because elevated body temperature in early pregnancy may cause brain and spinal birth defects.
- Women who may be pregnant should not handle cat litter to avoid toxoplasmosis, a disease that can cause hearing, vision, and brain damage.
- Women who may be pregnant should tell the doctor or technician before having x-rays. X-ray exposure should be avoided or minimized during pregnancy. The reproductive organs can usually be shielded if x-rays are needed.
- Drug or alcohol use in any amount can cause birth defects and poor brain development. Get help to stop using if necessary!
- Tobacco use increases the chances of low birth-weight and doubles the risk of a pregnancy outside the womb.
- Ask your health provider before taking any medicine, whether herbal, over-the-counter, or prescription.

A father's exposure to environmental hazards, medications, health habits, medical history, and smoking, drug, or alcohol use may also play a role in the pregnancy.

While pre-pregnancy lifestyle changes are the most beneficial for the baby, it is important to seek prenatal care and change any potentially harmful behaviors as early as possible. Every day is a good day to care for the development of your baby.



*This information sheet is one in a series called **You and Your Baby**. Contact your county Extension office or visit www.childcaremississippi.org for more information on you and your baby. The American Academy of Pediatrics also provides educational reading materials at www.healthychildren.org.*



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