

# Getting Ready for a Baby?

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Deciding to expand a family and bring a beautiful new life into this world is a big decision. Having a baby is one of the most wonderful and memorable experiences in a woman's life and marks the beginning of a journey that will truly transform her body into a remarkable vessel of support and protection of her unborn child. Preparation for this journey can ensure both a healthy mother and child. This preparation is called preconception care, which provides a chance for her to focus on healthy lifestyle options that will benefit both she and her baby.

Preconception counseling by her doctor can identify medical conditions, environmental factors, and lifestyle choices that may be harmful to her or her baby. Education about these issues and taking steps to become as healthy as possible before conception can increase chances of having an uncomplicated pregnancy and healthy baby. Preparation can also help her body to adjust to the stress of pregnancy, labor, and eventually delivery.

Many women do not recognize pregnancy until they are several weeks into their gestation. These early weeks are extremely important for the baby's growth; during the first eight weeks, most of the major organs and body systems have begun to form. Poor health (uncontrolled diabetes or hypertension etc), smoking, drinking alcohol, and using certain medications (prescription or over the counter) can cause harm to the baby and impede normal growth. Proper health care, with a preconception planning visit for women on medications or with medical issues, can ensure a normal growth and development for their children at one of the most important times of fetal development - the first trimester.

Some medical conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, depression, thyroid abnormalities, and seizure disorders can cause issues during pregnancy. Women with any medical conditions requiring medication should seek a preconception visit before attempting pregnancy to discuss possible harms of her medications to baby. Some of these medications can lead to birth defects and must be changed before becoming pregnant. This does not mean that a woman with these

medical issues cannot have a normal, healthy pregnancy - it just means that she should plan prior to pregnancy and ensure that her body is prepared to be a healthy vessel.

Some medications, including over the counter supplements and medications, can be harmful to a developing baby and should be avoided while attempting pregnancy and throughout pregnancy. For example, isotretinoin is a prescription med used to treat severe acne, but it can cause severe birth defects in a developing baby. Even common nutritional supplements can be harmful. For instance, some multivitamins contain a very high level of Vitamin A, which has been shown to cause severe birth defects if taken at these high levels in pregnancy. Some herbal supplements and meds have not been studied in pregnancy at all and should simply be avoided for unknown risk status. So, it would be most helpful to bring bottles of all meds - prescription and over the counter/supplements - to the preconception visit. The healthcare provider can ascertain if she should stop taking certain meds or if the benefit of continuing the medication during pregnancy would outweigh the risks to baby.

Another important discussion prior to conception is regarding past obstetric history. Some of the complications in prior pregnancies can have a higher risk of recurrence in later pregnancies. Some of these complications include preterm labor and preterm birth, gestational hypertension, preeclampsia, and gestational diabetes. However, just because these complications occurred in a prior pregnancy does not mean it will happen again, especially with proper care prior to pregnancy. Another important aspect of obstetric history is prior miscarriage or stillbirth. Often, women who have experienced these issues fear this happening again. However, most women who do miscarry once actually proceed with a normal pregnancy and healthy baby in future pregnancies. But, with a history of recurrent pregnancy loss (stillbirth or miscarriage of two or more), certain studies should be completed prior to attempts at conception to identify risks of mom's body rejecting the pregnancy and finding means to prevent this from occurring.

A balanced diet should be an important aspect of daily life, but it is vital during pregnancy. Nutrients from the food eaten provide energy for the growing baby and must be substantial enough to support both mom and baby. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's food-planning guide called MyPlate ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) can help design a healthy diet. Though most of the body's nutrients come from the foods eaten, it is a smart choice to begin taking a prenatal vitamin supplement at least 2-3 months before pregnancy occurs. Folic acid is an essential B vitamin that helps prevent neural tube defects (birth defects of the nervous system). All fertile

aged women should take 400 micrograms of this vitamin daily. Folic acid is found in many foods and is an additive in breads, cereal, and pastas, but it is very difficult to consume enough of these foods to get the recommended daily allowance of this vitamin. Most prenatal vitamins contain 600-800 micrograms of this vitamin.

Obesity is a major health problem in the United States in general and is certainly an issue in the South. About one fourth of reproductive-aged women are obese, and another one fourth are overweight. Excessive weight during pregnancy is associated with several pregnancy and childbirth complications including high blood pressure, preeclampsia, preterm birth, and gestational diabetes. Maternal obesity also can cause macrosomia (larger than normal baby) as well as increased complications of vaginal birth injury and cesarean delivery. The risk of birth defects, especially neural tube defects, are increased with maternal obesity as well. An increased amount of central body fat can also make it difficult for the obstetrician to monitor the baby during pregnancy and labor. Losing weight before pregnancy is the best manner to prevent these complications.

Successful preparation for pregnancy gives the baby the best possible start. Eating right, staying fit, avoiding unhealthy substances and maintaining a healthy weight are key factors in preconception. Beginning a pregnancy journey fully prepared allows mom to focus on the future and joys ahead.