



<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

# Prenatal Care

**Q: What is prenatal care?**

**A:** Prenatal care is the health care you get while you are pregnant. Take care of yourself and your baby by:

- Getting **early** prenatal care. If you know you're pregnant, or think you might be, call your doctor to schedule a visit.
- Getting **regular** prenatal care. Your doctor will schedule you for many checkups over the course of your pregnancy. Don't miss any — they are all important.
- Following your doctor's advice.

**Did you know?**

Several types of health care professionals can help pregnant women and deliver babies. They include obstetricians, family physicians, midwives, and nurse-midwives. This fact sheet calls all health care professionals "doctor" only to keep the information as easy to read as possible.

**Q: Why do I need prenatal care?**

**A:** Prenatal care can help keep you and your baby healthy. Babies of mothers who do not get prenatal care are three times more likely to have a low birth weight and five times more likely to die than those born to mothers who do get care.

Doctors can spot health problems early when they see mothers regularly. This allows doctors to treat them early. Early treatment can cure many problems and

prevent others. Doctors also can talk to pregnant women about things they can do to give their unborn babies a healthy start to life.

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

**A:** You should start taking care of yourself before you start trying to get pregnant. This is called preconception health. It means knowing how health conditions and risk factors could affect you or your unborn baby if you become pregnant. For example, some foods, habits, and medicines can harm your baby — even before he or she is conceived. Some health problems also can affect pregnancy.

Talk to your doctor before pregnancy to learn what you can do to prepare your body. Women should prepare for pregnancy before becoming sexually active. Ideally, women should give themselves at least 3 months to prepare before getting pregnant.

The five most important things you can do before becoming pregnant are:

1. Take 400 micrograms (400 mcg or 0.4 mg) of folic acid every day for at least 3 months before getting pregnant to lower your risk of some birth defects of the brain and spine. You can get folic acid from some foods. But it's hard to get all the folic acid you need from foods alone. Taking a vitamin with folic acid is the best and easiest way to be sure you're getting enough.
2. Stop smoking and drinking alcohol. Ask your doctor for help.
3. If you have a medical condition, be sure it is under control. Some con-



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ditions include asthma, diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, obesity, thyroid disease, or epilepsy. Be sure your vaccinations are up to date.

4. Talk to your doctor about any over-the-counter and prescription medicines you are using. These include dietary or herbal supplements. Some medicines are not safe during pregnancy. At the same time, stopping medicines you need also can be harmful.
5. Avoid contact with toxic substances or materials at work and at home that could be harmful. Stay away from chemicals and cat or rodent feces.

**Q: I'm pregnant. What should I do — or not do — to take care of myself and my unborn baby?**

**A:** Follow these dos and don'ts to take care of yourself and the precious life growing inside you:

**Health Care Dos and Dont's**

- Get early and regular prenatal care. Whether this is your first pregnancy or third, health care is extremely important. Your doctor will check to make sure you and the baby are healthy at each visit. If there are any problems, early action will help you and the baby.
- Take a multivitamin or prenatal vitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg or 0.4 mg) of folic acid every day.
- Ask your doctor before stopping any medicines or starting any new medicines. Some medicines are not safe during pregnancy. Keep in mind that even over-the-counter medi-

cines and herbal products may cause side effects or other problems. But not using medicines you need could also be harmful.

- Avoid x-rays. If you must have dental work or diagnostic tests, tell your dentist or doctor that you are pregnant so that extra care can be taken.
- Get a flu shot if your baby's due date is between March and July. Pregnant women can get very sick from the flu and may need hospital care.

**Food Dos and Don'ts**

- Eat a variety of healthy foods. Choose fruits, vegetables, whole grains, calcium-rich foods, and foods low in saturated fat. Also, make sure to drink plenty of fluids, especially water.
- Get all the nutrients you need each day, including iron. Getting enough iron prevents you from getting anemia, which is linked to preterm birth and low birth weight. Eating a variety of healthy foods will help you get the nutrients your baby needs. But ask your doctor if you need to take a daily prenatal vitamin or iron supplement to be sure you are getting enough.
- Protect yourself and your baby from food-borne illnesses, including toxoplasmosis (TOK-soh-plaz-MOH-suhss) and listeria (lih-STEER-ee-uh). Wash fruits and vegetables before eating. Don't eat uncooked or undercooked meats or fish. Always handle, clean, cook, eat, and store foods properly.
- Don't eat fish with lots of mercury, including swordfish, king mackerel, shark, and tilefish.



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### Lifestyle Dos and Don'ts

- Gain a healthy amount of weight. Your doctor can tell you how much weight gain you should aim for during pregnancy.
- Don't smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs. These can cause long-term harm or death to your baby. Ask your doctor for help quitting.
- Unless your doctor tells you not to, try to get at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week. It's best to spread out your workouts throughout the week. If you worked out regularly before pregnancy, you can keep up your activity level as long as your health doesn't change and you talk to your doctor about your activity level throughout your pregnancy. Learn more about how to have a fit pregnancy.
- Don't take very hot baths or use hot tubs or saunas.
- Get plenty of sleep and find ways to control stress.
- Get informed. Read books, watch videos, go to a childbirth class, and talk with moms you know.
- Ask your doctor about childbirth education classes for you and your partner. Classes can help you prepare for the birth of your baby.

### Environmental Dos and Don'ts

- Stay away from chemicals like insecticides, solvents (like some cleaners or paint thinners), lead, mercury, and paint (including paint fumes). Not all products have pregnancy warnings on their labels. If you're unsure if a product is safe, ask your doctor before using it. Talk to your

doctor if you are worried that chemicals used in your workplace might be harmful.

- If you have a cat, ask your doctor about toxoplasmosis. This infection is caused by a parasite sometimes found in cat feces. If not treated toxoplasmosis can cause birth defects. You can lower your risk of by avoiding cat litter and wearing gloves when gardening.
- Avoid contact with rodents, including pet rodents, and with their urine, droppings, or nesting material. Rodents can carry a virus that can be harmful or even deadly to your unborn baby.
- Take steps to avoid illness, such as washing hands frequently.
- Stay away from secondhand smoke.

### **Q: I don't want to get pregnant right now. But should I still take folic acid every day?**

**A:** All sexually active women should get 400 micrograms (mcg or 0.4 mg) of folic acid every day. Even women with a small chance of getting pregnant should get their daily dose of folic acid. This is because many pregnancies are not planned. Often women don't know they are pregnant for a number of weeks. And some birth defects happen in the very first weeks of pregnancy.

Taking 400 mcg of folic acid every day will lower the risk of some birth defects that happen in early pregnancy. If a woman doesn't start taking vitamins until 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.



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**Q: How often should I see my doctor during pregnancy?**

**A:** Your doctor will give you a schedule of all the doctor's visits you should have while pregnant. Most experts suggest you see your doctor:

- about once each month for weeks 4 through 28
- twice a month for weeks 28 through 36
- weekly for weeks 36 to birth

If you are older than 35 or your pregnancy is high risk, you'll probably see your doctor more often.

**Q: What happens during prenatal visits?**

During the first prenatal visit, you can expect your doctor to:

- ask about your health history including diseases, operations, or prior pregnancies
- ask about your family's health history
- do a complete physical exam, including a pelvic exam and Pap test
- take your blood and urine for lab work
- check your blood pressure, height, and weight
- calculate your due date
- answer your questions

At the first visit, you should ask questions and discuss any issues related to your pregnancy. Find out all you can about how to stay healthy.

Later prenatal visits will probably be shorter. Your doctor will check on your health and make sure the baby is growing as expected. Most prenatal visits will include:

- checking your blood pressure
- measuring your weight gain
- measuring your abdomen to check your baby's growth (once you begin to show)
- checking the baby's heart rate

While you're pregnant, you also will have some routine tests. Some tests are suggested for all women, such as blood work to check for anemia, your blood type, HIV, and other factors. Other tests might be offered based on your age, personal or family health history, your ethnic background, or the results of routine tests you have had. Visit the Healthy Pregnancy section of our web site for more details on prenatal care and tests.

**Q: I am in my late 30s and I want to get pregnant. Should I do anything special?**

**A:** As you age, you have an increasing chance of having a baby born with a birth defect. Yet most women in their late 30s and early 40s have healthy babies. See your doctor regularly before you even start trying to get pregnant. She will be able to help you prepare your body for pregnancy. She will also be able to tell you about how age can affect pregnancy.

During your pregnancy, seeing your doctor regularly is very important. Because of your age, your doctor will probably suggest some extra tests to check on your baby's health.

More and more women are waiting until they are in their 30s and 40s to have children. While many women of this age have no problems getting pregnant, fertility does decline with age.



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Women over 40 who don't get pregnant after six months of trying should see their doctors for a fertility evaluation.

Experts define infertility as the inability to become pregnant after trying for one year. If a woman keeps having miscarriages, it's also called infertility. If you think you or your partner may be infertile, talk to your doctor. Doctors are able to help many infertile couples go on to have healthy babies.

**Q: Where can I go to get free or reduced-cost prenatal care?**

**A:** Women in every state can get help to pay for medical care during their pregnancies. This prenatal care can help you

have a healthy baby. Every state in the United States has a program to help. Programs give medical care, information, advice, and other services important for a healthy pregnancy.

To find out about the program in your state:

- Call **1-800-311-BABY** (1-800-311-2229). This toll-free telephone number will connect you to the Health Department in your area code.
- For information in **Spanish**, call **1-800-504-7081**.
- Contact your local Health Department. ■

### *For more information*

You can find out more about prenatal care by contacting [womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

**National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities**

Phone number: (888) 232-4636  
Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/>

**Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development**

Phone number: (800) 370-2943  
Internet address: <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/>

**March of Dimes**

Phone number: (888) 663-4637  
Internet address: <http://www.modimes.org/>

**American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**

Phone number: (800) 762-2264 (for publications requests only)  
Internet address: <http://www.acog.org/>

**American Pregnancy Association**

Phone number: (972) 550-0140  
Internet address: <http://www.american-pregnancy.org/>

**Smart Moms, Healthy Babies**

Phone number: (734) 936-4000  
Internet address: <http://www.smartmoms.org/>