

Healthy Pregnancy, Healthy Baby

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Contributing Authors: Barb Heinzl MPH, CHES & Shannon Fuller, CHES

Early and regular prenatal care is essential to the health of women and their unborn babies. Exposure to unhealthy behaviors or certain environmental factors can harm a fetus. Prenatal care includes visiting the physician for a pre-pregnancy checkup, adopting a healthy lifestyle, and taking the B vitamin folic acid daily.

A pre-pregnancy checkup is one of the most valuable steps in planning for a baby. The physician visit will include discussing your medical and family history, medications you take, any past pregnancies you've had, and your diet and lifestyle. Your answers will help the physician create a special plan for your pregnancy. It is also a time for you to discuss any personal questions or concerns, such as safe medications, safe exercises, and a list of potential hazards you should avoid.

A woman can help prevent certain birth defects of the brain and spinal cord called "neural tube defects" (NTDs) by starting to take the B vitamin folic acid before becoming pregnant. Neural tube defects are serious birth defects that occur very early in a baby's development, within four weeks after conception. During this period of pregnancy, the neural tube forms and closes to eventually form the spinal cord and brain. When the neural tube does not close properly, an NTD occurs. It is recommended that all women of childbearing age consume 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Natural foods that are rich in folic acid include orange juice, green leafy vegetables, beans, peas, liver, and fortified breakfast cereals. The surest way to get the recommended amount of folic acid is to eat a healthy diet and take a multivitamin supplement containing folic acid. Your physician will prescribe a prenatal vitamin at the time of your pre-pregnancy checkup.

The weight a woman gains during pregnancy is also very important. It is a significant indicator of healthy weight gain by the baby and should be monitored. The total weight gain recommended in pregnancy is 25 to 35 pounds for women of average weight and height. Women who are underweight or overweight should discuss their recommended weight gain with their physicians. Average weight gain is distributed as follows:

- Baby 6-8 pounds
- Placenta 1-2 pounds
- Body fluid 2-3 pounds
- Blood volume 3-4 pounds
- Amniotic fluid 2 pounds
- Uterine enlargement 2 pounds
- Maternal breast enlargement 1-2 pounds
- Maternal stores of fat and protein for lactation or nursing the baby 6-8 pounds

A balanced diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low fat dairy products and protein is vital for the health and proper development of a baby.

Exercise improves the health of everyone and holds several benefits for pregnant women. These benefits include helping to decrease pregnancy discomforts such as constipation, backache, fatigue, and varicose veins. It is important that all pregnant women check with their physicians before starting or continuing an exercise program. Walking, stationary bike cycling, and swimming are excellent cardiovascular activities that are safe during pregnancy. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) usually recommends 30 minutes or more of a moderately strenuous activity such as walking, cycling, and swimming. However, it is important to listen to your body and stop exercising if you feel fatigued, short of breath, dizzy, develop headaches, muscle weakness, nausea, chest pain, uterine contractions, or vaginal bleeding.

Lifestyle behaviors that may affect the health of a baby during pregnancy include the following:

- Alcohol abuse can increase the risk of a baby having fetal alcohol syndrome, a condition of mental and physical defects.
- Smoking and drug use doubles the risk of ectopic pregnancies, miscarriages, and low-birth-weight babies. Drug use by fathers may also affect the baby. Be aware that second hand smoke can also cause potential problems to your baby's health.
- Diet – Excessive caffeine from coffee, tea, and soda may increase the risk of miscarriage.

If your pregnancy is unplanned, it is important to seek prenatal care soon and consider changing lifestyle behaviors that may be harmful to you and your baby.

This information is provided for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for sound medical judgment. If you have any questions or concerns, you should discuss them with your physician.

Resources:

The March of Dimes

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Related Healthy Living Links:

HealthyExtensions

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Today's Health and Wellness Magazine