

Importance of Good Prenatal Care

Patient Education Module

What is prenatal care?

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

1. Getting early prenatal care. If you know you're pregnant, or think you might be, call your doctor to schedule a visit.
2. Getting regular prenatal care. Your doctor will schedule you for many checkups during your pregnancy. Do not miss any, they are all important.
3. Following your doctor's advice. Doctors also can talk to pregnant women about things they can do to give their unborn babies a healthy start to life.

Why do I need prenatal care?

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. Early treatment can cure many problems and prevent others.

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

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 to 800 micrograms 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. It is hard to get all the folic acid you need from foods alone. Taking a vitamin with folic acid is the best 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 conditions 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 medications you need 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.

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

1. Get early and regular prenatal care.
2. Take a multivitamin or prenatal vitamin with 400 to 800 micrograms of folic acid every day. Folic acid is most important in the early stages of pregnancy, but you should continue taking folic acid throughout pregnancy.
3. Ask your doctor before stopping any medicines or starting any new medicines.

4. 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.
5. Get a flu shot. Pregnant women can get very sick from the flu and may need hospital care.

Food do's and don'ts

1. 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. Eating a variety of healthy foods will help you get the nutrients your baby needs.
2. 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. Ask your doctor if you need to take a daily prenatal vitamin or iron supplement to be sure you are getting enough.
3. Protect yourself and your baby from food-borne illnesses, including toxoplasmosis and listeria. 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.

Lifestyle do's and don'ts

1. Gain a healthy amount of weight. Your doctor can tell you how much weight gain you should aim for during pregnancy.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Don't take very hot baths or use hot tubs or saunas.
5. Get plenty of sleep and find ways to control stress.
6. Get informed. Read books, watch videos, go to a childbirth class, and talk with moms you know.
7. Ask your doctor about childbirth education classes for you and your partner. Classes can help you prepare for the birth of your baby.

Environmental do's and don'ts

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Take steps to avoid illness, such as washing hands frequently.
5. Stay away from secondhand smoke.