

What is prenatal care and why is it important?

Having a healthy pregnancy is one of the best ways to promote a healthy birth. Getting early and regular prenatal care improves the chances of a healthy pregnancy. This care can begin even before pregnancy with a preconception care visit to a health care provider.

Preconception Care

A preconception care visit can help women take steps for a safe and healthy pregnancy before they get pregnant.

Women can help to promote a healthy pregnancy and birth of a healthy infant by taking the following steps before they become pregnant¹:

- Develop a plan for their reproductive life.
- Increase their daily intake of folic acid (one of the B vitamins) to at least 400 micrograms.
- Make sure their immunizations are up to date.
- Control diabetes and other medical conditions.
- Avoid smoking, drinking alcohol, and using drugs.
- Attain a healthy weight.
- Learn about their family health history and that of their partner.
- Seek help for depression or anxiety.

Prenatal Care

Women who suspect they may be pregnant should schedule a visit to their health care provider to begin prenatal care. Prenatal visits to a health care provider include a physical exam, weight checks, and providing a urine sample. Depending on the stage of the pregnancy, health care providers may also do blood tests and imaging tests, such as ultrasound exams. These visits also include discussions about the mother's health, the infant's health, and any questions about the pregnancy.

Preconception and prenatal care can help prevent complications and inform women about important steps they can take to protect their infant and ensure a healthy pregnancy. With regular prenatal care women can:

- Reduce the risk of pregnancy complications. Following a healthy, safe diet; getting regular exercise as advised by a health care provider; and avoiding exposure to potentially harmful substances such as lead and radiation can help reduce the risk for problems during pregnancy and ensure the infant's health and development. Controlling existing conditions, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, is important to avoid serious complications in pregnancy such as [preeclampsia](#).
- Reduce the infant's risk for complications. Tobacco smoke and alcohol use during pregnancy have been shown to increase the risk for [Sudden Infant Death Syndrome](#). Alcohol use also increases the risk for fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, which can cause a variety of problems such as abnormal facial features, having a small head, poor coordination, poor memory, intellectual disability, and problems with the heart, kidneys, or bones.² According to one recent study supported by the NIH, these and other long-term problems can occur even with low levels of prenatal alcohol exposure.³

In addition, taking 400 micrograms of folic acid daily reduces the risk for neural tube defects by 70%.⁴ Most prenatal vitamins contain the recommended 400 micrograms of folic acid as well as other vitamins that pregnant women and their developing fetus need.^{4,5} Folic acid has been added to foods like cereals, breads, pasta, and other grain-based foods. Although a related form (called folate) is present in orange juice and leafy, green vegetables (such as kale and spinach), folate is not absorbed as well as folic acid.

- Help ensure the medications women take are safe. [Certain medications](#), including some acne treatments⁶ and dietary and herbal supplements,⁷ are not safe to take during pregnancy.

Learn more about [prenatal and preconception care](#).

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