

WHAT TO DO BEFORE GETTING PREGNANT

by Leandro Rodriguez, MD

Many times pregnancy happens spontaneously, without previous planning and premeditation. In most cases, when the mother is in good health, this does not have any serious consequences for the development of the fetus and maternal health.

Nevertheless, the optimal situation would be that one in which the prospective mother can anticipate the timeframe during which she would like to embark in this very exciting stage in her life.

Preconceptional planning gives the patient an opportunity to assess their health, their lifestyle and any modifications that may be necessary. It is also an opportunity to talk to family members and inquire about common medical problems and birth defects if any.

Visit With Your Doctor

A logical first step for the personal health evaluation is to visit your gynecologist for an annual exam. It is important to mention your plans to attempt to conceive. During this evaluation your doctor will perform a physical examination and will also review your personal and family medical history.

In order to be able to get the most benefit from this visit it is helpful to anticipate the questions that you will be asked. These will include:

- Personal or family history of chronic medical problems
- Personal or family history of birth defects
- Personal or family history of developmental delays
- Medications that you are currently on and those that have been discontinued in the recent past
- Your current method of birth control
- Previous pregnancy history including spontaneous or elective abortions

Different answers to these questions may trigger additional testing or examinations prior to pregnancy. It may also lead to recommendations regarding medications and their safety during pregnancy. In the case that you are using a medication that is not compatible with pregnancy this may be the most adequate time to look for an alternative.

Following the history taking by your doctor he or she will proceed to perform a complete physical examination. This can lead to detection of medical problems that may need attention prior to pregnancy. In some cases it can lead to the diagnosis of gynecologic problems like abnormal Pap Smears, benign uterine tumors, ovarian tumors and breast masses that are better addressed prior to a pregnancy.

After your full evaluation your doctor may recommend some or all of the following test:

- Glucose testing (testing for diabetes)
- Hypothyroidism screening
- Cystic fibrosis screening
- Testing for immunity for rubella
- Testing for sickle cell trait
- HIV
- Hepatitis B and C
- Tests directly related to pre-existing medical conditions in the mother or family

Initiation of intake of prenatal vitamins or folic acid will also be recommended.

Lifestyle Changes

The mother's lifestyle can be a source of risk factors for the future pregnancy.

Weight: when planning to have a baby it is ideal to reach a healthy weight before pregnancy. Excessive weight can cause high blood pressure or diabetes. Obese mothers have a higher chance of delivering large babies which in turn leads to a higher chance of having a cesarean section.

On the other hand, underweight mothers have a higher chance of delivering a low birth weight baby.

Exercise: following a fitness routine before conception can improve your chances of having a comfortable and active pregnancy. Swimming and walking are good forms of exercise.

Domestic violence: women who are victims of domestic abuse prior to pregnancy are even more likely to be abused during pregnancy. It is important to know that a pregnancy is unlikely to change the current relationship dynamic.

Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drugs: smoking, drinking, and drug use during pregnancy can harm the baby. It is imperative to quit prior to pregnancy. You should also encourage your partner to quit since the use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs can lower his fertility. Exposure to secondhand smoke has also been related to more frequent respiratory infections and sudden infant death syndrome in the baby.

Environment: certain chemicals as well as radiation in high amount can lead to congenital anomalies. If your work involves use of chemicals or exposure to radiation ask your doctor about the specific risks.

Medical Conditions and Immunizations

Women who have diabetes, seizures, high blood pressure, heart disease, or those who are obese may need special care during pregnancy. In many cases your doctor can inform you what to expect during pregnancy and if your treatment needs to be modified.

As a general rule any existing medical problem needs to get under control before pregnancy.

It is also importance to make sure that you immunizations are up-to-date since infection like measles, mumps, and rubella can cause birth defects or illnesses in the fetus.

Infections

Sexually transmitted diseases can be harmful to a pregnancy. Furthermore, they can affect your ability to get pregnant. If you think you or your partner may have an STD, get tested and treated. In the case of mothers infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) early treatment can help prevent the infection to be passed to the fetus.

In summary, taking action on health issues BEFORE pregnancy can prevent future problems for the mother and her baby.

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