

Fact Sheet

Pre-pregnancy planning



If you're planning to have a baby it is advisable to be well informed and prepared to provide the best care for yourself and your baby.

How long should it take to conceive?

Most healthy, fertile couples achieve a pregnancy within the first 12 months of trying. Every month that a couple is trying to get pregnant there is about a 20% chance of being successful. Women over 35 can take twice as long to conceive. Unprotected sexual intercourse about three times a week prior to and at ovulation time maximises the chance of conception.

Nutrition

It is important to have a well-balanced and nutritionally sound diet. Freshly prepared low fat, high fibre diet is the basis of good health. Women should aim for normal weight before conception.

Folic acid

Folic acid supplements are advisable for all women. Women should have at least 0.4mg daily (tablets are generally available in 0.5mg strength) for a minimum of one month before conception, and for the first three months of pregnancy.

Folic acid reduces the risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect such as spina bifida. If you have diabetes, are taking anti-epileptic medication or have a family history of neural tube defects, you may be at a higher risk and should discuss this with your doctor.

Iodine

Iodine is essential for the production of thyroid hormones. These hormones are vital for the development of the brain and nervous system of the fetus, and in babies and young children. Evidence shows that many Australian women do not get enough iodine from food alone.

Women should take 150 micrograms of iodine daily if they are planning a pregnancy, are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Women who have thyroid problems should talk to their doctor prior to taking a supplement.

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Exercise

Sensible, regular, non-contact exercise is important. Avoid intense exercise and getting overheated.

Infection control

Some infections before conception and in pregnancy can present a risk to the fetus. These infections include rubella, syphilis, toxoplasmosis, listeria, cytomegalovirus and HIV.

Having a fever in pregnancy can also be harmful to the baby so taking paracetamol may be advised.

Rubella

Rubella (German measles) infection in pregnancy is a big concern. Most women have been vaccinated against rubella and are immune, but this immunity can wear off over time.

It is advisable to be tested for your rubella immunity status before becoming pregnant. You can be vaccinated if your immunity is low, but you should take care to avoid getting pregnant within 28 days of your vaccination.

Varicella

Varicella (chicken pox) infection in pregnancy can also be harmful so you should consider vaccination before becoming pregnant. Your GP can check if you need this. But you must take care to avoid getting pregnant within 28 days of your vaccination.

Listeria

Listeria can cause fetal death if contracted during pregnancy. It is caused by common bacteria which can contaminate food. It has been found in many fresh and unprocessed foods such as unpasteurised milk, soft cheeses, cold processed meats, pre-cut fruit and salads, pâté, raw seafood and smoked seafood.

To avoid a listeria infection in pregnancy, it's best to:

- avoid the foods listed above
- carefully wash raw vegetables
- thoroughly cook all foods of animal origin
- thoroughly clean utensils after preparing uncooked food

Toxoplasmosis

This infection can have a similar effect to listeria. It is acquired by close contact with infected cats or eating uncooked or undercooked meat. Pregnant women should get another person to clean cat litter boxes daily, wear disposable rubber gloves for handling soil likely to be contaminated with cats' faeces, and carefully wash hands after gardening or handling raw meat. All meat should be well cooked through before eating.

Smoking, alcohol and other drugs

Smoking is not advised during pregnancy. Ideally quit three months before conception. Avoid exposure to passive smoke.

Caffeine intake should be reduced to a maximum of two cups of coffee a day (or four cups of tea).

It is not advisable to drink alcohol during pregnancy.

Stop other recreational drugs and discuss over-the-counter drugs with your doctor or pharmacist.

Genetic counselling

If you have had a child with a genetic disorder, a family history of genetic disorders, or if you're over 35 you are at higher risk.

Genetic disorders include Down's syndrome, thalassaemia, cystic fibrosis, haemophilia and Tay-Sachs disease; some of these are more common in certain populations. Your doctor can provide advice about genetic testing and counselling for yourself and your partner. Your doctor can also advise you about the tests that are available during pregnancy to detect abnormalities.

Blood group

Your GP will check your blood group so the Rhesus factor is known. Rhesus-negative blood in the mother combined with a Rhesus-positive group in the father requires medical attention.

Checkpoint summary

- See your doctor for routine blood tests and a health check
- Stop smoking
- Stop alcohol and other social drugs
- Reduce caffeine intake
- Review current medications
- Follow a healthy diet
- Take folic acid for at least 1 month before conception and for the first three months of pregnancy
- Take iodine supplementation pre pregnancy, in pregnancy and when breastfeeding
- Develop a good exercise routine
- Ensure rubella and varicella immunity
- Have a Pap test
- Eat freshly cooked and freshly prepared food
- Consider family history and genetic counselling
- Consider health insurance cover
- Visit the dentist

For further information

- Contact the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- NRS (for deaf): 133 677
- Commonwealth government website: Pregnancy, Birth and Baby www.healthdirect.org.au/pbb (Helpline: 1800 882 436)
- Mothersafe: for information on medications in pregnancy for NSW women 1800 647 848 www.mothersafe.org.au

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