

# Preconception Care- Goals for a Healthier me and baby-to-be!

## Preconception Care: Timing is Key

The fetus is vulnerable to developing certain problems 17–56 days after conception. Prenatal health care, which usually begins in weeks 11 or 12 of pregnancy, may be too late to prevent these problems. This is particularly true in the case of certain prescription drugs that are known to cause birth defects and hazardous substances in the workplace and home.

## What WE Can Do

As a health professional, you have an important role in preconception health and health care. Health professionals can support the three goals of preconception care by:

- Screening for risks.
- Recommending interventions to address identified risks.
- Promoting health and providing education.

## Protecting Your Reproductive System

Your reproductive system is one of the most fragile systems of your body. It can easily get infected or injured. If it does, you might have long-term health problems. Taking simple steps to prevent getting or spreading [HIV/AIDS](#) and other sexually transmitted diseases ([STDs](#)) will help protect you and your loved ones. An STD is an infection or disease that you get by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who already has an STD.

Some STDs can be “silent,” which means you do not show any signs of infection, illness, or disease. Others can have mild to severe symptoms. Get regular checkups for STDs, even if you do not have any symptoms.

Protecting your reproductive system means having control over if and when you become pregnant. Choosing which type of birth control to use may not be easy. We can help you choose among the options.

## Overview



### Preconception Health

*Preconception health* refers to the health of women and men during their reproductive years, which are the years they can have a child. It focuses on taking steps now to protect the health of a baby they might have sometime in the future.

However, all women and men can benefit from preconception health, whether or not they plan to have a baby one day. This is because part of preconception health is about people getting and staying healthy overall, throughout their lives. In addition, no one expects an unplanned pregnancy. But it happens often. In fact, about half of all pregnancies in the United States are not planned.

There have been important advances in medicine and prenatal care in recent years. Preconception health and preconception health care can make a difference.

### Preconception Health Care

*Preconception health care* is the medical care a woman or man receives from the doctor or other health professionals that focuses on the parts of health that have been shown to increase the chance of having a healthy baby. It can be a step to obtain information on women and men fertility potential through simple non invasive tests.

Preconception health is important for every woman—not just those planning pregnancy. It means taking control and choosing healthy habits. It means living well, being healthy, and feeling good about your life. Preconception health is about making a plan for the future and taking the steps to determine when to start a family.

Preconception health care is different for every person, depending on his or her unique needs.

## Plan Pregnancies

### 1. See Your Doctor: Make a Plan and Take Action

Before getting pregnant, talk to your doctor about [preconception health care](#). Your doctor will want to discuss your health history and any medical conditions you currently have that could affect a pregnancy. He or she also will discuss any previous pregnancy problems, medicines that you currently are taking, vaccinations

that you might need, and steps you can take before pregnancy to prevent certain birth defects.

**2. Eat healthy foods.**

Planning meals and snacks ahead of time and having the food on hand make it less likely that I will make unhealthy choices. Make a list before I go to the grocery store, farm stand or market, or neighborhood garden. Include plenty of vegetables and fruits. (Eat my colors!) Shop the outside edge of the store where the healthiest food is sold.

**3. Be active.**

Setting aside a time for regular physical activity and being active with a friend will help me keep my plan. Fitting in several 10 minute physical activity sessions throughout the day can help me reach my activity goal. Try to get 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity each week.

**4. Take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid daily.**

Folic acid is good for my health. Taking it daily will help prevent birth defects of the brain and spine when I decide to or if I get pregnant before I am ready. Take a vitamin with folic acid every day unless I eat a serving of breakfast cereal that says it has 400mcg of folic acid on the nutrition label.

**5. Protect myself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).**

Get checked if I have been exposed to STIs.

**Protect myself from other infections**

Wash my hands frequently with soap and water.

Ask my partner to change the cat litter.

Stay away from people who are sick.

Try not to share food, drinks, utensils with young children.

**7. Avoid harmful chemicals, metals, and other toxic substances around the home and in the workplace.**

**8. Make sure my vaccinations (shots) are up-to-date.**

Vaccinations are our best defense against many diseases. Sometimes, those diseases can cause serious problems. I want to protect myself against those diseases. Remember to get a flu shot every year, especially if I am pregnant. Check the vaccination schedule before I see my doctor

**9. Manage and reduce stress and get mentally healthy.**

Be aware of things that cause me stress. Make a plan to reduce my stress. Get enough rest. Exercise to lift my mood. Limit alcohol and avoid cigarettes and other drugs. Find a support person or group, if needed.

**10. Stop Smoking.**

Smoking is not healthy for me or others around me. I want to be healthy! Second hand smoke is not healthy either. I will avoid being around people when they smoke and will ask my partner not to smoke around me. Smoking can cause problems for the woman, such as difficulty getting pregnant, separation of the placenta from the womb too early resulting in bleeding, placenta covering the cervix which can cause bleeding, and the water breaks too early. Problems for the baby include being born too small, being born too early, dying before birth or after birth, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and possible birth defects. Secondhand smoke can cause early death and disease among children and adults who do not smoke. A pregnant woman who is exposed to secondhand smoke has 20% higher chance of giving birth to a baby with low birthweight than women who are not exposed to secondhand smoke during pregnancy.

**11. Stop using street drugs as well as prescription medicine that are not mine.**

Taking drugs not prescribed for me is not good for me or my baby-to-be. There are different effects depending on the drugs used. I want my baby and me to be as healthy as possible!

**12. Reduce my alcohol intake before I try to get pregnant, and stop drinking while trying to get pregnant.**

Drinking alcohol can be habit forming. Drinking alcoholic drinks when trying to get pregnant and during pregnancy can cause problems for me and my baby. I want my baby and me to be healthy and free of bad habits.

Reduce my drinking to less than 7 drinks a week and never more than 1 on any occasion before trying to get pregnant.

Make an appointment with my doctor to talk about help for this. Stop drinking when I start trying to get pregnant and right away if I find myself pregnant before planned. Drinking during pregnancy can cause birth defects. There is no known safe level of alcohol in pregnancy.

**13. Stop partner violence.**

Abuse can be emotional, physical, or sexual. No one deserves to be abused. I love myself and my child or children enough to take steps to deal with violence if it should happen to me or my family.

**14. Manage my health conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, overweight.**

Learn more about my health condition(s). Talk with my doctor about a plan to manage my health condition(s) and my medicines.

**15. Learn about my family's health history.**

Learning about health problems in my family can help my doctor and me determine which problems to look for and how to prevent or deal with them. Ask my parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins about any health problems in the family.

16. Get regular checkups. See my doctor as needed for other problems.

Your preconception health is important for you and your baby-to-be. Keep this checklist handy so that you can look at it regularly, update it, and talk with your partner and your doctor about how to best put this plan into action. Remember to take this tool with you to your appointment. Life is full of changes so make sure you update your plan regularly. Make time for yourself...Show yourself some love. Your baby will thank you for it.

## Information for Men



When most people hear the term *preconception health*, they think about women. However, preconception health is important for men, too. There are things men can do for their own health, as well as for the women and children in their lives.

### 1. Make a Plan and Take Action

Whether or not you've written them down, you've probably thought about your goals for having or not having children and how to achieve those goals. This is called a *reproductive life plan*. It's really important to have a plan and take action. Every woman, man, and couple can benefit from having a reproductive life plan based on her, his, or their own personal values, goals, and resources.

### 2. Prevent and Treat Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

Get screened and treated for any sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Continue to protect yourself and your partner from STDs during pregnancy. Pregnancy does not provide a woman or the baby she is carrying any protection against STDs. The consequences of an STD can be significantly more serious, even life threatening, for a woman and her unborn baby if the woman becomes infected with an STD while pregnant. In addition, some STDs can cause infertility (not being able to get pregnant) in a woman.

[Learn about STDs »](#)

[Learn about STDs and Pregnancy »](#)

### **3. Stop Smoking, Using “Street” Drugs, and Drinking Excessive Amounts of Alcohol**

Smoking, using “street” drugs, and drinking too much alcohol (binge drinking) is harmful to your health.

Secondhand smoke can cause early death and disease among children and adults who do not smoke. A pregnant woman who is exposed to secondhand smoke has 20% higher chance of giving birth to a baby with low birthweight than women who are not exposed to secondhand smoke during pregnancy.

In addition, drinking too much alcohol and using “street” drugs can cause infertility among men.

If you cannot stop drinking, smoking, or using drugs—get help! Contact your doctor or local treatment center.

#### **Alcohol and Drug Resources:**

[Learn about alcohol use »](#)

[Learn how to quit smoking »](#)

[Smoking and pregnancy »](#)

### **4. Be Careful About Toxic Substances**

Exposure to toxic substances and other harmful materials at work or at home, such as synthetic chemicals, metals, fertilizer, bug spray, and cat or rodent feces, can hurt the reproductive systems of men and women. They can make it more difficult for a couple to get pregnant. Exposure to even small amounts during pregnancy, infancy, childhood, or puberty can lead to certain diseases. Learn how to protect yourself and your loved ones from toxic substances and other harmful materials at work and at home.

“Toxic Matters” Brochure »  

[The effects of toxic substances on male reproductive health »](#)

## 5. Prevent Infertility

Sometimes a man is born with problems that affect his sperm. Other times, problems start later in life due to illness or injury. A man's sperm can be changed by his overall health and lifestyle. Some things that can reduce the health or number of sperm include:

- Type 1 diabetes
- Heavy alcohol use
- Some “street” drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, and anabolic steroids
- Smoking cigarettes
- Age
- Obesity
- Hazardous substances, including bug spray and metals, such as lead
- Diseases such as mumps, serious conditions like kidney disease, or hormone problems
- Medicines (prescription, nonprescription, and herbal products)
- Radiation treatment and chemotherapy for cancer

If you are concerned about fertility, talk with your doctor or another health professional.

## 6. Reach and Maintain a Healthy Weight

People who are [overweight or obese](#) have a higher risk for many serious conditions, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers. In addition, obesity among men is associated directly with increasing male infertility. People who are underweight also are at risk for serious health problems.<sup>4</sup>

The key to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight isn't about short-term dietary changes. It's about a lifestyle that includes healthy eating and regular physical activity. Staying in control of your weight contributes to good health now and as you age.

If you are underweight, overweight, or obese, talk with your doctor or another health professional about ways to reach and maintain a healthy weight.

[Learn about healthy weight »](#)

## 7. Learn Your Family History

Collecting your family's health history can be important for your child's health. You might not realize that your sister's heart defect or your cousin's sickle cell disease could affect your child, but sharing this family history information with your doctor can be important.

Based on your family history, your doctor might refer you for genetic counseling. Other reasons people go for genetic counseling include having had several miscarriages, infant deaths, or trouble getting pregnant (infertility) or a genetic condition or birth defect that occurred during a previous pregnancy.

[Learn more about family history »](#)

[Learn more about genetic counseling »](#)

## **8. Get Help for Violence**

From infants to the elderly, violence affects people in all stages of life. The number of violent deaths tells only part of the story. Many more people survive violence and are left with lifelong physical and emotional scars.

If someone is violent toward you or you are violent toward your loved ones—get help. Violence destroys relationships and families. If you are violent, you can choose to stop.

[Get help for yourself or someone else »](#)

## **9. Get Mentally Healthy**

Mental health is how we think, feel, and act as we cope with life. To be at your best, you need to feel good about your life and value yourself. Everyone feels worried, anxious, sad, or stressed sometimes. However, if these feelings do not go away and they interfere with your daily life, get help. Talk with your doctor or another health care professional about your feelings and treatment options.

## **10. Support Your Partner**

As partners, men can encourage and support the health of women. For example, if your partner is trying to eat healthier to get ready for pregnancy you can join her and eat healthier, too. Or if your partner has a medical condition, you can encourage her to see her doctor and remind her to follow her treatment plan.

## Planning for Pregnancy



If you are trying to have a baby or are just thinking about it, it is not too early to start getting ready for pregnancy. Preconception health and health care focus on things you can do before and between pregnancies to increase the chances of having a healthy baby. For some women, getting their body ready for pregnancy takes a few months. For other women, it might take longer. Whether this is your first, second, or sixth baby, the following are important steps to help you get ready for the healthiest pregnancy possible.

### 1. Make a Plan and Take Action

Whether or not you've written them down, you've probably thought about your goals for having or not having children, and how to achieve those goals. For example, when you didn't want to have a baby, you used effective birth control methods to achieve your goals. Now that you're thinking about getting pregnant, it's really important to take steps to achieve your goal—getting pregnant and having a healthy baby!

[Get started by using this checklist to help you set your goals for the year](#) 📄. See earlier.

### 2. See Your Doctor

Before getting pregnant, talk to your doctor about [preconception health care](#). Your doctor will want to discuss your health history and any medical conditions you currently have that could affect a pregnancy. He or she also will discuss any previous pregnancy problems, medicines that you currently are taking, vaccinations that you might need, and steps you can take before pregnancy to prevent certain birth defects.

If your doctor has not talked with you about this type of care—ask about it! [Take a list of talking points so you don't forget anything](#) 📄!

Be sure to talk to your doctor about:

### **Medical Conditions**

If you currently have any medical conditions, be sure they are under control and being treated. Some of these conditions include: sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), diabetes, thyroid disease, phenylketonuria (PKU), seizure disorders, high blood pressure, arthritis, eating disorders, and chronic diseases.

### **Lifestyle and Behaviors**

Talk with your doctor or another health professional if you [smoke](#), [drink alcohol](#), or use [“street” drugs](#) 📄; live in a stressful or [abusive environment](#); or work with or live around [toxic substances](#) 📄. Health care professionals can help you with counseling, treatment, and other support services.

### **Medications**

Taking certain [medicines during pregnancy](#) can cause serious birth defects. These include some prescription and over-the-counter medications and dietary or herbal supplements. If you are planning a pregnancy, you should discuss the need for any medication with your doctor before becoming pregnant and make sure you are taking only those medications that are necessary.

### **Vaccinations (shots)**

Some [vaccinations](#) are recommended before you become pregnant, during pregnancy, or right after delivery. Having the right vaccinations at the right time can help keep you healthy and help keep your baby from getting very sick or having lifelong health problems.

## **3. Take 400 Micrograms of Folic Acid Every Day**

Folic acid is a B vitamin. If a woman has enough folic acid in her body at least 1 month *before* and *during* pregnancy, it can help prevent major birth defects of the baby's brain and spine.

[Learn more about folic acid »](#)



#### **4. Stop Drinking Alcohol, Smoking, and Using Street Drugs**

Smoking, drinking alcohol, and using street drugs can cause many problems during pregnancy for a woman and her baby, such as premature birth, birth defects, and infant death.

If you are trying to get pregnant and cannot stop drinking, smoking, or using drugs—get help! Contact your doctor or local treatment center.

[Learn more about alcohol and pregnancy »](#)

[Learn more about smoking during pregnancy »](#)

#### **5. Avoid Toxic Substances and Environmental Contaminants**

Avoid toxic substances and other environmental contaminants harmful materials at work or at home, such as synthetic chemicals, metals, fertilizer, bug spray, and cat or rodent feces. These substances can hurt the reproductive systems of men and women. They can make it more difficult to get pregnant. Exposure to even small amounts during pregnancy, infancy, childhood, or puberty can lead to diseases. Learn how to protect yourself and your loved ones from toxic substances at work and at home.

[Learn about the effects of toxic substances on reproductive health »](#)

#### **6. Reach and Maintain a Healthy Weight**

People who are [overweight or obese](#) have a higher risk for many serious conditions, including complications during pregnancy, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers (endometrial, breast, and colon). People who are underweight are also at risk for serious health problems.

The key to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight isn't about short-term dietary changes. It's about a lifestyle that includes healthy eating and regular physical

activity.

If you are underweight, overweight, or obese, talk with your doctor about ways to reach and maintain a healthy weight before you get pregnant.

[Learn more about healthy weight »](#)

## **7. Get Help for Violence**

Violence can lead to injury and death among women at any stage of life, including during pregnancy. The number of violent deaths experienced by women tells only part of the story. Many more survive violence and are left with lifelong physical and emotional scars.

If someone is violent toward you or you are violent toward your loved ones—get help. Violence destroys relationships and families.

[Find out where to get help for yourself or someone else »](#)

[Learn about violence prevention »](#)

## **8. Learn Your Family History**

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## **9. Get Mentally Healthy**

Mental health is how we think, feel, and act as we cope with life. To be at your best, you need to feel good about your life and value yourself. Everyone feels worried, anxious, sad, or stressed sometimes. However, if these feelings do not go away and they interfere with your daily life, get help. Talk with your doctor or another health professional about your feelings and treatment options.

[Learn about mental health »](#)

[Learn about depression »](#)

## **10. Have a Healthy Pregnancy!**

Once you are pregnant, be sure to keep up all of your new healthy habits and see your doctor regularly throughout pregnancy for prenatal care.

[Learn how to have a healthy pregnancy »](#)

## **Content of Care for Women**

### **Every Woman, Every Time**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations emphasize that preconception care is not limited to a single visit to a health professional, but is a process of care that is designed to meet the needs of a woman during the different stages of her reproductive life.

All women of reproductive age are candidates for preconception care; however, preconception care must be tailored to meet the needs of the individual. For example, the provision of smoking cessation services is preconception care, as is choosing a medication for a patient with hypertension. Much of preconception care involves the provider reframing his or her thinking, counseling, and decision-making in light of the reproductive plans and sexual and contraceptive practices of the patient.

Given that preconception care ideally should occur throughout the reproductive years, some recommendations will be more relevant to women at specific stages in their lives and with varying levels of risk.

### **Clinical Care Criteria**

The clinical content of care topics were selected based on the following criteria:

- There is a good chance that the health of the mother or the infant will be improved if the condition is identified and addressed before pregnancy.
- The burden of suffering and prevalence of the condition are sufficient to justify screening and treatment.
- The condition is detectable in clinical care in either primary or specialty settings.

- If screening is used, the screening methods that are available to detect the condition are sufficiently predictive to justify screening.
- Clinical practice guidelines already exist that suggest that preconception interventions be implemented.

The clinical content of care items included on this website are **limited to those that meet the following standards:**

- There is good or fair evidence to support the recommendation that the condition be considered specifically in a preconception care evaluation.
- There is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against the inclusion of the condition in a preconception care evaluation, but recommendation to include or exclude might be made on other grounds.

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To see the complete list of the preconception clinical content and description of how the content was selected and rated, please [read the full article](#).

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## Clinical Content of Care for Men

Preconception care offers an opportunity, similar to the opportunity it presents for women, for disease prevention and health promotion among men. In addition, preconception care for men is an important factor in improving family planning and pregnancy outcomes for women, enhancing the reproductive health and health behaviors of men and their partners, and preparing for fatherhood.

Each male, planning with his partner to conceive a pregnancy, should have a comprehensive medical evaluation for the purposes of preventing and finding disease and providing preconception education. Management should be optimized for any high-risk behaviors or poorly controlled disease states prior to attempting conception.

### Importance of Preconception Health and Health Care for Men

Preconception health and health care for men:

- Is critical for ensuring that all pregnancies are planned and wanted.
- Can result in improved pregnancy outcomes by enhancing men's biologic and genetic contributions to the pregnancy conception.
- Can result in improved reproductive health biology for women.
- Can result in improved reproductive health practices and outcomes for women.
- Can result in their own improved ability to be a better father.
- Can be a venue for enhancing the health of men through access to primary health care.

### Table of Contents

For further detail on the preconception clinical content for men, please [read the full article](#)<sup>↗</sup>.

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