

PRE-PREGNANCY PLANNING

Deciding to have a baby is one of the most important, life-changing decisions you will make, so the better prepared you are, the better off both you and your baby will be. Plan to visit your family doctor at least 6 months before you want to become pregnant.

Since conception occurs about 2 weeks before your period is due, you may not know you're pregnant until you are more than 3 weeks along. Yet the baby is most sensitive to harm during the first 8 weeks of pregnancy, which is also a crucial time in terms of facial and organ development. Anything you ingest or are exposed to can harm your developing baby during this time.

Becoming a parent is a major commitment filled with challenges, rewards, and choices. By making a few healthy changes to your lifestyle now you will increase the likelihood of having a better pregnancy, of giving birth to a healthier baby, and of laying a good foundation for your family's new life.

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Straight talk
from your doctor

Produced by your physician and
the BC Medical Association to
promote better health care in BC



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03/04



THE INITIAL VISIT TO YOUR DOCTOR

During this initial visit your doctor will likely give you a complete physical. You and the father to be will probably be asked about your medical history. You may need some tests to see if you have any health issues that may harm your baby or you during pregnancy. Many treatments exist today that are designed to protect the two of you.

Rubella, or German measles, can be extremely harmful to your baby if you contract it while pregnant. A blood test before pregnancy will determine whether you are at risk for contracting this disease. If you've never had rubella, an immunization can be given to you before you get pregnant.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as gonorrhea, syphilis, and chlamydia can make it hard for you to get pregnant, and can also harm your baby during pregnancy or delivery. You should be screened and tested for these and other infections before pregnancy.

HIV, human immunodeficiency virus, the virus that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), can be passed onto your baby. It is important to know ahead of time if you are HIV-positive in order to make the best decisions.

Your doctor may also perform other tests depending on whether you are at risk for certain health concerns such as anemia or hepatitis, or have health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or epilepsy. It's usually safer and easier to treat these types of problems or get them under control before you're pregnant rather than during your pregnancy.

There are genetic diseases that run in families that could potentially put your baby at risk. Cystic fibrosis and sickle cell anemia are examples. These are not caused by anything you have or have not done. There are also other genetic problems that could occur if you are over the age of 35. Talk with your doctor about any risk factors.

Thalassemia is a blood condition common in people of Mediterranean descent. If you have a Mediterranean background you should be screened for this condition prior to pregnancy.

You need to tell your doctor about any medications, either prescribed or purchased over the counter, that you are currently taking since some of these can be harmful to your baby.

You will be advised to keep a record of your menstrual periods as this information is very important to the timing of certain medical procedures, such as ultrasounds and amniocentesis, after you become pregnant.

THINGS YOU CAN DO NOW TO PREPARE FOR A HEALTHY PREGNANCY

Women who have enough folic acid in their bodies before pregnancy can greatly decrease the risk of having a baby with serious brain or spinal cord defects. Folic acid, a B vitamin, should be taken in a dose of 1 mg daily for 3 months before conception because these problems develop very early in pregnancy – only 3 to 4 weeks after conception.

Found in green leafy vegetables (like spinach), broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, fruits such as oranges, cantaloupe, and bananas, milk, grains and organ meats, folic acid should be taken throughout the entire pregnancy. Pregnancy vitamins ensure that you get the recommended dose of 1 mg per day. If you choose a multivitamin instead, ensure that it contains at least 1 mg of folic acid, as many multivitamins do not.

If you are overweight, your risk during pregnancy for problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes increases. Therefore, you could use the time before becoming pregnant to lose some weight through exercise and diet changes. Talk with your doctor about the best program for you, as fad diets and rapid weight loss are not good for your body prior to pregnancy.

Smoking, alcohol, and drug use can all adversely affect the development of your baby. These have been linked to miscarriage, premature birth and low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) – which causes mental slowness, poor growth, and facial defects – or your baby could be born addicted to drugs. For the healthy development of your baby, and the health of your own body, it is best to stop these habits for several months before becoming pregnant. Your doctor can provide the right treatment for you if you have trouble stopping on your own.

If you are thinking of becoming pregnant, make sure that you book any x-rays during the first half of your menstrual cycles and avoid booking them during the second half when you may be pregnant. The radiation could be harmful to your developing baby.

Victims of domestic violence before pregnancy are often victims during pregnancy. If you are being abused, tell your doctor.