

Preconception counseling for healthier pregnancy

By Luke Leary

A safe and healthy pregnancy begins long before a test shows two pink lines. Scheduling preconception counseling with your healthcare provider can offer peace of mind when entering into one of the most exciting changes of one's life.

People thinking about having a baby need answers to complicated questions, such as: What medicines can I continue to take? What lab tests should I have done before getting pregnant? Can I continue going on long hikes at Zimmerman Park?

Preconception counseling is not much different than a typical appointment with your healthcare provider. The visit centers on planning for the future to optimize a woman's health before pregnancy. This will ensure maximum safety of both mother and child. Typically, medical history, family history, risk factors and lifestyle are all discussed. This simple visit is now recognized as an important steppingstone for a healthy pregnancy.

Studies show that women who have received prenatal counseling reduce the risks of congenital defects and neonatal death, according to the American Diabetes Association.

Infants born to mothers who did not get prenatal care are up to three times more likely to be of low birth weight, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These babies are five times more likely to die, compared to babies born to a mother who received prenatal care.

The good news is that making simple changes in how we approach pregnancy can drastically improve the outcomes for pregnant mothers. Montana in particular could benefit with an increase in preconception counseling. Our state was one of three in the whole country where more than 45% of residents had gone more than a year without seeing or talking to a doctor as of 2016. This is troubling.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of adults with multiple chronic conditions in the United States. This trend extends to the pregnant population as well. For example, over one half of pregnant women in the U.S. are overweight or obese.

Those conditions are just two of a multitude of factors that can increase the risk of complications in pregnancy. Statistics like these illustrate the importance of good prenatal health, yet in 2021, women who did not receive adequate care accounted for 23% of live births in the United States. Preconception counseling can be a valuable resource to help potential mothers with weight management and establishing a nutritious diet. Doctors often have access to resources that can improve all aspects of a mother's health. A healthy baby usually starts with a healthy mother.

Shared decision making between doctors and patients leads to improved outcomes. A preconception visit can help a patient learn about her body and understand her health conditions. When a mother knows her options in pregnancy, she is better equipped to make decisions regarding those options.

Your personal healthcare provider can help you establish goals and plan for both pregnancy and life after pregnancy.

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