

# Start planning for healthy baby before pregnancy

By Matt Lopiano

If you are thinking about having a baby in 2024, you probably have lots of questions about pregnancy and parenting. What should I eat? Can I keep running or bicycling? Is it safe to take medications? Even experienced parents have questions and jitters about pregnancy.

The first phases of prenatal care should start well before conception. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends starting prenatal supplements at least one month before attempting to get pregnant. Taking prenatal vitamins with folate/folic acid daily prevents or at least lowers the risk of abnormal development of the baby's brain and spinal cord.

Your first medical checkup during pregnancy should be within three months of becoming pregnant. During this visit, moms-to-be can expect the provider to take a detailed medical history, including any prior successful or failed pregnancies.

Blood work is also a routine part of the initial prenatal health screening. This information will help identify risk factors so you and your provider can anticipate any complications. Health screenings also help your provider to determine when to refer you to a specialist for potentially higher risk pregnancies.

What you eat during pregnancy has a direct impact on the developmental growth of the baby. After the second trimester, moms who were a healthy weight before pregnancy (body mass index of 18.5 to 25) should increase calorie intake to gain about a pound per week.

Moms who were overweight (body mass index higher than 25) before becoming pregnant usually are advised against increasing their calorie intake during pregnancy. Women with too much weight gain during pregnancy are at higher risk for conditions like gestational hypertension, preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, large birth weight of baby and premature delivery.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, women who are underweight before becoming pregnant (body mass index less than 18) and low weight gain during pregnancy are at risk for delivering prematurely. Then the baby would be at risk for respiratory complications and low birth weight.

Unless otherwise instructed by your obstetrical provider, moderate exercise is always encouraged. Moms who exercise throughout pregnancy lower their risk of complications and decrease postpartum recovery time. Cardiovascular exercise such as jogging, power walking and nonstrenuous weightlifting is allowed. Pelvic floor training can also reduce postpartum bladder leaking and tearing that can occur during birth.

Every pregnancy is different. That is why having proper ongoing counseling and medical management is essential for protecting your health and your baby's health. Obstetricians, maternal fetal medicine specialists, family practitioners and certified nurse midwives provide professional prenatal care. Finding a provider you trust to be involved in a very intimate part of your life will set you and the baby up for success.

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