

Plan for a Healthy Pregnancy before You are Pregnant

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We prepare for many things in life – such as school, careers, marriage. But, have you considered the importance of preparing for a pregnancy? This means more than setting up a nursery – it means preparing yourself. We often do not consider that the time before a woman becomes pregnant has a great impact on the health of both mother and baby. Pregnancy is one of the most important events for any woman to prepare. Significant problems can develop for a baby within the first 4-10 weeks of pregnancy, but, many women are not aware they are pregnant until after this time. So, it is crucial for women to understand how to prepare for pregnancy. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has identified five steps to take before becoming pregnant. They are:

1. Take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day for at least 3 months before getting pregnant to help prevent birth defects.
2. Stop smoking and drinking alcohol.
3. If you have a medical condition, be sure it is under control. Some conditions include asthma, diabetes, oral health, obesity, or epilepsy. Also be sure that your vaccinations are up to date.
4. Talk to a health care professional about any over-the-counter and prescription medicines you are taking. These include dietary or herbal supplements.
5. Avoid contact with toxic substances or materials that could cause infection at work and at home. Stay away from chemicals and cat or rodent feces.

In addition to these steps, it is important to schedule a time with your doctor to review your health status. During this visit, discuss your plans to become pregnant with your doctor. He/she will need to find out information on your family medical history, any previous history of pregnancy or miscarriage, and conduct basic health status checks on weight, height, blood pressure. It is important to have a Pap Smear and breast exam, as well. Be open about any health concerns you may have, such as diabetes, heart problems or sexually transmitted diseases, to help assure you are at your optimal health before becoming pregnant. If any special health conditions are identified, your doctor may recommend measures and more closely monitor your pregnancy to assure little or no complications arise.

As the CDC recommends above, before becoming pregnant, be sure you are up to date on your immunizations. There are complications which can arise if you get certain illnesses while pregnant. And, once you are pregnant, it is too late for most immunizations. If you are unsure of your history, your doctor can conduct lab tests to help identify your need for crucial immunizations.

Even if you are not considering becoming pregnant, it is important to keep these recommendations in mind. Over half of the pregnancies in the United States are unplanned (CDC). All women of child-bearing age, and who are sexually active should consider their health. Taking these simple steps to prepare for pregnancy can make a significant difference to your health, and the health of your baby.

Once you are pregnant, or if you suspect you are pregnant, see your doctor immediately. Women who receive early prenatal care, and appropriate care throughout their pregnancy, have less complications and are more likely to have healthy, full term babies.

What happens if you are uninsured, and cannot afford prenatal care? There are services in Charlotte County to help. Since 1996, the Charlotte County Healthy Start Coalition (CCHSC) has worked to improve the health of pregnant women and newborns in Charlotte County. CCHSC provides pregnancy testing, applications for pregnancy Medicaid, childbirth education classes, care coordination, mental health counseling, tobacco cessation counseling, and in-home parenting education. Additional information on the services offered can be obtained by calling the Charlotte County Healthy Start Coalition Office at 941-255-8872.