



# ***Preconception & Beyond: Tips for Good Health***

## **1. Eat a healthy diet and get to a healthy weight:**

- 60% of Americans are overweight.
- Women have a greater challenge with losing the excess weight they may have gained during their pregnancy. (Breastfeeding can help with losing some of this weight). With each pregnancy this pattern could continue leading to obesity over time.
- Research has shown that obese and overweight women are at greater risk for gestational diabetes, pregnancy induced hypertension (high blood pressure or toxemia), preterm labor, and maternal mortality.
- After delivery, overweight and obese women have more difficulty initiating and maintaining breastfeeding than do women of normal weight.

## **2. Be physically active every day:**

- Being physically active for at least 30 minutes every day is important for good health and can help with weight maintenance.
- Sitting or being sedentary for long periods of time is not healthy.
- A woman who is physically active before and during her pregnancy will have a greater chance of having an easier delivery and a healthy baby.

## **3. Get a medical and dental checkup every year.**

- An annual physical and dental check-up is recommended for everyone
- Research indicates that poor oral health in pregnant women is linked to preterm labor.
- Before getting pregnant, women should be current with their immunizations, and should be tested for diabetes, high blood pressure, infections and other health problems.

## **4. Take a multivitamin with folic acid daily:**

- Most Americans do not get all their nutritional needs met through food.
- To ensure that you meet all your nutrient needs, it is suggested to take a multivitamin supplement with folic acid every day.
- It is recommended that all women of childbearing age take a multivitamin supplement with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day, even when not pregnant, to prevent neural tube birth defects.
- Folic Acid is a B-vitamin found in food and is very important in preventing birth defects. It also helps prevent strokes, heart disease and cancer. Foods high in folic acid include fortified cereals, beans, orange juice, dark green leafy vegetables, citrus fruits, whole grains and peanuts.

## **5. Plan when you want to have a baby:**

- More than 50% of pregnancies are unplanned.
- Family planning counseling from your doctor can help prevent an unplanned pregnancy.
- A woman's health, from the moment she gets pregnant, has major influence on the development of the fetus. A woman who plans her pregnancy has the opportunity to help her body be ready for a baby from the moment of conception.
- When a woman has a "surprise" pregnancy, she may have health problems (such as being overweight, diabetes, etc.) which were not taken care of or resolved. These may affect her unborn baby for the rest of his life.
- Each time a woman gets pregnant, her growing baby uses her body for all the nutrition it needs. This depletes the woman's nutritional stores, so she has to ensure that her body is back to good health before she gets pregnant again.
- Doctors recommend at least 18-24 months between pregnancies to allow a woman's body to recover from the previous pregnancy.

**6. Stop smoking, drinking alcohol and taking illegal drugs:**

- When a woman stops these behaviors before she gets pregnant, she can make sure that her fetus is not exposed to these chemicals from the moment she gets pregnant.
- Mothers who smoke during pregnancy are at risk of having a premature and low birth weight baby.
- In men, alcohol may decrease sperm production, and smoking is linked to some heart defects.

**7. Identify and learn to manage your stress:**

- Very high levels of stress may contribute to preterm birth or low birth weight in full-term babies.
- Stress is also known to contribute to weight gain.
- Stress management strategies may include: exercise, relaxation techniques, fostering healthy friendships, getting plenty of sleep, professional counseling or psychotherapy. The payoff of managing stress is peace of mind and perhaps a longer, healthier life.

**8. Get adequate sleep:**

- Insufficient sleep is associated with a number of chronic diseases and conditions.
- Chronic sleep loss and sleep disorders are also associated with health problems. Research, for example, has found that insufficient sleep is linked to an increased risk for the development of type 2 diabetes.
- Chronic sleep loss and sleeping disorders themselves are associated with any number of physical and mental health problems, including obesity, hypertension, diabetes, depression, anxiety, and high cholesterol and mortality.
- If you are one of the many people who are short on sleep, here are CDC's tips: *Stick to a regular sleep schedule. Sleep in a dark, well-ventilated space at a comfortable temperature. Avoid stimulating activities within two hours of bedtime. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol in the evening. Avoid going to bed on a full or empty stomach. See a doctor if you are concerned about chronic sleep problems.*

**9. Find people who can support you to be healthy:**

- It is important for a woman to have emotional and physical support from her family (partner/husband) so that she can be in good health before she plans her pregnancy.
- A woman should ask for help from friends and family when she feels she needs it. It is easier to change behavior and stay with a healthy plan if there are people around supporting you in your decision and helping make your life more manageable.

**10. Stop smoking, drinking alcohol and taking illegal drugs:**

- When a woman stops these behaviors before she gets pregnant, she can make sure that her fetus is not exposed to these chemicals from the moment she gets pregnant.
- Mothers who smoke during pregnancy are at risk of having a premature and low birth weight baby.
- In men, alcohol may decrease sperm production, and smoking is linked to some heart defects.

## What can men do to support the preconception health of their female partners and their future babies?

- Men can make a big difference in promoting good preconception health. As boyfriends, husbands, fathers-to-be, partners, and family members, they can learn how their loved ones can achieve optimal preconception health. They can encourage and support women in every aspect of preparing for pregnancy.
- There are other ways men can help. Men who work with chemicals or other toxins need to be careful that they don't expose women to them. For example, men who use fertilizers or pesticides in agricultural jobs should change out of dirty work cloths before coming near their female partners. They should handle and wash soiled cloths separately. The family health histories of men are also important when planning a pregnancy.

**Good preconception health care is about managing current health conditions. By taking action on health issues BEFORE pregnancy, future problems for the mother and baby can be prevented.**

Resources:

March of Dimes [www.marchofdimes.com](http://www.marchofdimes.com)

Organization of Teratology Information Specialists [www.otispregnancy.org](http://www.otispregnancy.org)

Georgia Department of Human Resources, Family Health Branch. <http://health.state.ga.us/programs/family>