

YOUR REPRODUCTIVE LIFE PLANNING GUIDE



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KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Are you thinking about having a baby? If the answer is yes, then now's the time to start planning and preparing. What you and your partner do to get ready even before you get pregnant will help your baby get the best start possible.

You can prepare for pregnancy...

- **Physically:** Healthy parents tend to have healthy babies. So taking folic acid before you conceive, eating nutritious foods, getting enough exercise, rest and avoiding harmful substances like alcohol and tobacco are especially important if you're thinking about having a baby. You should also visit your health care provider for a preconception visit.
- **Emotionally:** Be sure that you are committed to becoming a parent. This means being able to handle the responsibilities of caring for and nurturing a baby. It also means providing guidance and love throughout the child's developing years.
- **Financially:** Unfortunately, diapers aren't free, and babies don't come with their own bank accounts. It's best to start planning as early as possible for the extra costs of having children.

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ARE YOU READY PHYSICALLY?

The healthier and happier you are, the easier it will be to become pregnant. And, while you're trying to get pregnant, keeping yourself healthy is one thing you can do.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO PREPARE YOURSELF PHYSICALLY

Here's how to get started:

- *Take a multivitamin supplement that includes 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.* Folic acid is a B vitamin that helps a baby's neural tube – the part of a developing baby that becomes the brain and spinal cord – develop properly. It must be taken before and during early pregnancy when the neural tube is developing. The best way to get enough folic acid is to take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid in it and eat a healthy diet. Foods rich in folic acid include fortified breakfast cereals (check the box for 100% folic acid), orange juice and leafy green vegetables.
- *Stop smoking.* Smoking may make it harder for you to get pregnant and it's definitely bad for your baby once you are pregnant. If you smoke while you are pregnant, you increase your risk of miscarriage, stillbirth or SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Your baby will be at greater risk for being born prematurely or too small. Later in life, your child may have an increased risk of asthma, developmental delays and learning disabilities. If you smoke, the best time to stop is before you get pregnant. And now is the time to begin avoiding secondhand smoke.

Quitting is hard. Some people can quit on their own, but others need help. Getting support from a partner or friend helps. Joining a support group will offer you companionship and advice. Aversion therapy, hypnosis and acupuncture can also be effective techniques for quitting. If you're sure you are not pregnant yet, you could use nicotine patches or gum – but be sure to stop using these at least two days before you start trying to get pregnant. Or see a health care provider for prescription medication that may help you stop.

- *Stop drinking.* Drinking alcohol (liquor, wine, beer, wine coolers) can make it harder for you to get pregnant. If you do get pregnant and still drink, you put your baby at risk for miscarriage, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and fetal alcohol effects (FAE). Babies with FAS have serious physical and mental problems that are permanent. Babies with FAE have these problems to a lesser degree. No one knows exactly how much alcohol a woman has to drink to cause FAS or FAE, so the safest thing to do if you're thinking about having a baby is to stop drinking entirely. If you have trouble giving up alcohol, talk to your health care provider or find a support group.
- *Stop using illegal drugs.* Taking illegal or "street" drugs during pregnancy is risky for mother and baby. Women who use cocaine are at higher risk of miscarriage and preterm labor. Babies exposed to heroin are likely to be born addicted. Babies exposed to illegal drugs are also more likely to have learning or behavioral problems later in life. Stop using any illegal drugs before you try to get pregnant and stay clean throughout your pregnancy. If you need help giving up drugs, find an addiction treatment program in your area or look in the telephone book for a local Narcotics Anonymous group.
- *Go for a pre-pregnancy checkup².* This is a smart idea for anyone who wants to have a baby. Your health care provider needs to know that you want to have a baby so he or she can help you be as healthy as possible before, during and after pregnancy. Ideally, you should see the provider who will take care of you during your pregnancy, although you can also visit your primary care provider.

¹This information and these questions have been taken from "Are you Ready? A Guide to Planning a Healthy, Happy Pregnancy, March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, 2000. To order multiple copies of this guide, call 1-800-367-6630. This guide is also available in Spanish.

²Attached is a Preconception Health Screening and Tune-Up Form that provides a quick tool for women and their partners to identify and list factors that might put the woman's health or pregnancy outcome at risk. You can use the results of your self-assessment to guide your discussions with your health care provider.

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EXPECT IT

YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER WILL:

- *Ask about your "history":* Know your health, your partner's health and your family's health. Don't worry if you don't have all the answers. If you, your partner or close relatives have certain birth defects or disorders, you may need to see a genetic counselor and have special tests to see if these problems could be passed on to your baby if you get pregnant.
- *Explain how pregnancy might affect any medical conditions you may have, such as epilepsy, diabetes or high blood pressure.* Chances are, you will be able to have a normal pregnancy even if you have a pre-existing medical condition, but you may need to take special precautions. If you are on medication, your health care provider may ask you to change to a drug that is safer during pregnancy.
- *Make sure you have all your immunizations or are immune to infections diseases* Catching a disease like chickenpox, rubella or measles during pregnancy can be extremely dangerous for a developing baby. So, before you get pregnant you should be sure that you are immune, either because you've had the disease before or because you have had an immunization shot. If you aren't sure if you are immune to these diseases, you can be tested through a simple blood test. If you need to be immunized, you should wait at least three months after the shot before trying to become pregnant. In addition to the diseases mentioned above, some health care providers recommend updating immunizations for other diseases such as mumps, hepatitis B and tetanus. And, if you plan to travel to another country in the near future, your health care provider may recommend additional immunizations.
- *Review any medications you are taking* – including prescriptions, over-the-counter, herbal or alternative medicines. Many medications are not safe to use during pregnancy. So it's important to ask about any medication you currently use or may need to use in the future.

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ASK IT

Remember to ask questions! Don't be afraid to ask your health care provider about any issues that concern you. You can write down questions ahead of time and take them to the appointment.

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Also, don't forget about dental health. It's a good idea for you to see your dentist for a checkup before you get pregnant. You can visit your dentist while you are pregnant but, if you need to have special dental work done, it's best to have it done before you conceive. If there's any chance that you may already be pregnant when you see your dentist, be sure to let the dentist know so no X-rays will be taken.

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AVOID IT

- **Avoid infections.** Some infections can harm a developing baby. Start taking care of yourself to avoid getting sick by following these rules:
 - *Wash your hands* well with soap and water after using the bathroom, blowing your nose or that of your children, touching soil, outdoor cats and their litter boxes or uncooked meats.
 - *Avoid potentially unsafe foods* such as raw meat and fish and unpasteurized mil products.
 - *Ask about illnesses* in family and friends before going to visit.
 - *Only have sex with one person* who doesn't have any other sex partners and/or use a condom (male or female) when having sex.
 - *If you have a cat, ask someone else to change the litter* or wear gloves when you do it. Do not allow your cat to eat raw meat or rodents.
- **Avoid hazardous chemicals at work and home.** It's important to stay away from toxic chemicals or other hazardous substances that could be dangerous to your baby. Some chemicals used in cleaning and killing insects can be dangerous. If your water pipes are old, your drinking water may contain lead.
 - *Ask your health care provider about any substance* you work with that you suspect may not be healthy during pregnancy. If dangerous, ask your employer to help you avoid exposure.
 - *At home, try to avoid exposure to any strong-smelling cleaners,* chemicals and paint. If you can't eliminate your exposure to dangerous substances completely, reduce your risk by wearing rubber gloves, a face mask, and working in a well-ventilated area.

- **Avoid stress.** Stress isn't good for you or your baby, before, during or after pregnancy. Too much stress may increase the risk of preterm labor, low birthweight and possibly miscarriage. Start reducing stress now:
 - *Identify causes of stress*, then try to eliminate them.
 - *Cut back on unnecessary activities* that contribute to your stress level.
 - *Ask partners, family and friends for emotional support* or get professional counseling
 - *Get regular exercise and use relaxation techniques* such as deep-breathing.
 - *Call a hotline* or ask your health care provider or another trusted person for help if you are in a relationship where you are in danger of being harmed. Verbal abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse.

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- **Eat right and maintaining a healthy weight.** You'll feel better and start your pregnancy off right if you eat a variety of nutritious foods every day. The Food Guide Pyramid shows food from the six food groups. Use the shape of the pyramid as a guide: eat more of the foods from the bottom of the pyramid and less of the foods from the top.
- **Get fit.** Exercise is a good way to help maintain or lose weight, build fitness and reduce stress. If you aren't already exercising, now is a good time to start. Talk to your health care provider about activities you enjoy, to find out if they are safe to do while you're pregnant. Once you decide on safe activities that you like, try to exercise for 20 minutes or more at least three times a week. Good exercise choices before and during pregnancy include:
 - Walking
 - Swimming
 - Water aerobics
 - Stretching
 - Cycling (with caution)
 - Housework
 - Gardening (be sure to wear gloves)
- **Baby Spacing.** Most experts recommend waiting two years or more in between pregnancies so that you and your baby can be as healthy as possible. Baby spacing increase the likelihood that your next baby will be born healthy and that you will have time to recover physically, emotionally and financially before the birth of your next child.

- **Dads need to be healthy, too.** Your partner can improve his chances of becoming a father if he takes care of himself. Starting a few months before you try to get pregnant, he should:
 - Stop or cut back on smoking and drinking alcohol.
 - Stop using illegal drugs.
 - Eat a nutritious diet and lose weight, if needed.
 - Minimize stress.
 - Avoid being around chemicals, toxins and pollution.

ARE YOU READY EMOTIONALLY?

Are you ready to be a parent? It's a great big, full-time job. There is no right or wrong time to have a baby – it's up to you and your partner. Take a look at the following questions – they can help you think through some of the emotional and lifestyle issues you will face as a parent. Also, discuss them with your partner – it is important that you agree on most of the major issues, or begin discussing your differences before you conceive.

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THINK ABOUT IT

TEN QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU HAVE A BABY:

- Why do you want to have a baby? Do you want to have a baby or are you being pressured by your partner, parent or someone else?
- How will a child affect your relationship with your partner? Are you both ready to become parents?
- If you're not in a relationship, are you prepared to raise a child alone? Who will help support you?
- How will a baby affect your future educational or career plans?
- Do you and your partner have religious or ethnic differences? Have you discussed how you will handle these and how they might affect your child?
- What will you do for child care?
- Are you prepared to parent a child who is sick or has special needs?
- Are you ready to give up sleeping in on Sunday mornings? Finding child care every time you want to go out without your baby?
- Do you enjoy spending time with children? Can you see yourself as a parent?
- What did you like about your childhood? What didn't you like? What do you want for your child?

These are tough questions and there are no correct answers. Only you can decide if you're emotionally ready to have a baby.

ARE YOU READY FINANCIALLY?

The time to start thinking about the costs of having a baby is before you get pregnant. Having a baby can be expensive. But if you plan ahead, these new costs will be easier to manage.

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CHECK IT

- **Take a look at your budget.** Write down what you spend monthly for housing, food, clothes, insurance or medical costs, entertainment, transportation, and any other expenses you may have. Compare what you spend with that amount of money you have coming in each month. How much is left over? You might find you need to cut back on your spending to make room in your budget for the things your baby will need:
 - Diapers
 - Car seat and other equipment
 - Clothes
 - Medical care
 - Food
 - Crib
 - Child care
 - Toys
- **Find out about maternity leave policy where you work.** If you work full time and plan to return to your job after your baby is born, you should find out about your company's policies. If you work at a company with more than 50 employees and you've been working there for at least a year, you have the right to take 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave. You are also guaranteed your job back at the end of your leave. Some companies have paid maternity leave, others require new mothers to apply for short-term disability with additional time taken as sick days, vacation or as unpaid leave. Some companies let women with families do some work from home, either temporarily or permanently. Checking out exactly what maternity and paternity benefits your employer offers before you get pregnant will make it easier to plan for your baby.
- **Check out your health insurance.** Whether you get your insurance through your job, your partner's job, Medicaid, or you pay for it directly, find out what it offers to pregnant women. Specifically, find out:
 - Does it cover prenatal care?
 - Does it cover your health care provider?
 - What delivery options are covered?
 - Is there a co-payment? How much?
 - Are anesthesia & emergency C-sections covered?
 - What prenatal tests are covered?
 - Does it cover a pre-pregnancy planning visit?
 - Does it cover hospital costs for the baby?
 - Is there a deductible? How much?
 - Are sick and well-baby visits covered?

If your insurance does not cover some of these basic items or you feel your out-of-pocket costs will be too high, you may want to switch to a different plan. But you must do this before you get pregnant.

- **Find out the benefits to low-income families.** There are some programs that offer special benefits to low-income women who are pregnant. For example, the WIC program provides food to pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and children. The children's health insurance program in your state (Florida KidCare) will provide free or low-cost coverage if you are eligible, even if you and/or your partner are working. Immunizations are often free at public health clinics, and Medicaid can cover other health expenses. Good places to find out about programs like these are at your local health department, NEFL Healthy Start Coalition website: www.nefhealthystart.org, local March of Dimes chapter and the blue pages in the white pages telephone directory.
- **Make money saving a habit.** The time to begin financial planning and saving for your new baby is now. If you decide to stop working after your baby arrives, begin planning for living on less. Begin to save now and make believe you're living on just one income. If you're going to take unpaid leave, try to save to help make up for your temporarily reduced income.
- **Review or purchase long-term disability and life insurance coverage.** No one likes to think about life insurance. But, if you're thinking about a new baby, you need to think about how you will take care of that child if something happens to you. Planning ahead for the unthinkable, while difficult, will give you peace of mind and ensure your family will be able to live comfortably and still pay the mortgage, bills and even college tuition. Most families consider term life insurance, which insures you for a fixed amount of money for a given premium and disability insurance, which insures your earning potential in case you are disabled and cannot work. If you're between the ages of 35 and 65, you are more likely to become disabled than to die, so don't overlook this important type of insurance.



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PRE-PREGNANCY TEST

1. You start preparing for a healthy baby at your first prenatal care visit?
True or False
2. It's dangerous to use street drugs when you're pregnant, but over-the-counter drugs are ok?
True or False
3. Working around dangerous chemicals before pregnancy can be harmful to your future baby's health?
True or False
4. There is a lot of hype about vitamins; but all you really have to do is eat healthy foods.
True or False
5. There is not much you can do before getting pregnant that could make a difference in your baby's health?
True or False

CHECK YOUR ANSWERS

1. False. You have to start preparing for your baby even before you become pregnant. By the time of your first prenatal visit, your baby's vital organs are already forming. So it's important to visit your health care provider before you get pregnant to make sure you are as healthy as you can be before you start trying to conceive.
2. False. You should talk to your health care provider before you get pregnant about the safety of all prescriptions and nonprescription medications you take.
3. True. Avoid toxic substances – such as lead (in paint, soil or water), pesticides, paint solvents, strong household cleaners and dry-cleaning fluid – at home and at work. They may make it difficult to become pregnant and can harm the developing baby. Discuss any workplace exposure you are concerned about with your health care provider.
4. False. It is very important to take a multivitamin containing 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Even if you eat a healthy diet – which you should do if you are trying to get pregnant – it's still hard to get all the folic acid you need to help prevent certain birth defects. So, make taking a vitamin with folic acid a daily habit.
5. False. There is a lot you can do before you get pregnant to help make your baby's future a bright one! Eating well, taking folic acid supplements, quitting bad habits like smoking or drinking – these are just a few things you can do. Start today and help your baby get the best possible start in life.

WHAT'S YOUR FOLIC ACID IQ?

1. The best way to get enough folic acid to help protect your baby from birth defects of the brain and spinal cord is:
 - A. Eat a banana every day.
 - B. Take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.
 - C. Drink two glasses of milk every day.
 - D. Do nothing. Most women get enough in their diets.
2. When should you begin taking folic acid?
 - A. When you're three months pregnant.
 - B. When your health care provider prescribes prenatal vitamins.

- C. Before you start trying to get pregnant.
- D. Every time you have sex.

1. You're trying to get more folic acid in your diet. Which of the following foods is your best choice?
 - A. French fries.
 - B. Cheeseburger.
 - C. Fortified breakfast cereal.
 - D. Pizza

2. Folic acid is good for moms-to-be, too. Studies show it can reduce your risk of:
 - A. Heart disease.
 - B. Colon cancer.
 - C. Stroke.
 - D. All of the above.

3. You're thirsty and you have a choice of the following beverages. Which is the best choice if you're trying to increase your intake of folic acid?
 - A. Cranberry juice.
 - B. Orange juice.
 - C. Apple juice.
 - D. Lemonade.

CHECK YOUR ANSWERS

The correct answers are:

1. B. Take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.
2. C. Before you start trying to get pregnant.
3. C. Fortified breakfast cereal.
4. D. All of the above.
5. B. Orange juice



CONSIDER IT

YOUR PRE-PREGNANCY DIARY

Are you ready to start trying to get pregnant? Use this check list to help figure out if you're ready!

Ask yourself these questions:

	Yes	No
My partner and I have talked about having a baby?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I'm ready for the responsibility of taking care of a baby?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I've started a budget for a baby?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I'm taking a multivitamin with folic acid every day?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I've had a pre-pregnancy checkup with my health care provider?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I've stopped smoking?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I've stopped drinking and using illegal drugs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I've asked my health care provider about over-the-counter & prescription medications?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I'm avoiding exposure to infections, dangerous chemicals or other things that could make me sick?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I'm at a healthy weight to start a pregnancy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know which maternity expenses my insurance covers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know what my company's maternity leave policy is?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered "Yes" to every question, then you're ready!

If you answered "No" to any of the questions, try to turn each of those answers into a "Yes" before you start trying to get pregnant.

Write down lifestyle changes or actions you need to take on the following worksheet to help your baby get the best start possible.

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PREPARE FOR IT

YOUR PRE-PREGNANCY HEALTH CARE INFORMATION

Use this to help you keep track of your pre-pregnancy activities.

My health care provider is:

Name: _____

Type of health care provider: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Date of my pre-pregnancy checkup: _____/_____/_____

Special tests I should have before I get pregnant: _____

Immunizations I should have before I get pregnant: _____

Medical conditions and medications I want to discuss with my health care provider: _____

Questions or concerns I want to share with my health care provider: _____

My dentist is:

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Dental work I may need to get done before I get pregnant: _____

Weight:

My weight today is _____ pounds.

My ideal pre-pregnancy weight should be _____ pounds.

I need to gain/lose _____ pounds before I get pregnant.