



## PRECONCEPTUAL COUNSELING

### **Q. I'M NOT PLANNING TO GET PREGNANT FOR A LONG TIME. WHY SHOULD I EVEN THINK ABOUT BIRTH DEFECTS?**

A. So many pregnancies are unplanned! If you are having sex and you are capable of becoming pregnant, you should be taking 0.4 mg. of folic acid each day in case you become pregnant--even if you are not planning to become pregnant for a long time. This vitamin can prevent certain common birth defects like spina bifida, an opening in the spinal column, and anencephaly, lack of brain development. Any birth control method can fail. By the time you realize you are pregnant, it may be too late for folic acid to help prevent these birth defects since they occur in the first 28 days of pregnancy. Plus, you will be maintaining a good habit for the future--and it will not be as hard to remember to take a multivitamin with folic acid later when you are thinking about pregnancy. As a reminder, try to connect your vitamins with an activity you do every day, like brushing your teeth. You can even keep your multivitamins right next to your toothbrush! That way, every time you brush you will remember to take your vitamin.

### **Q. I AM THINKING ABOUT GETTING PREGNANT SOMETIME IN THE NEAR FUTURE. WHAT SHOULD I DO TO PREPARE?**

A. That is smart and increases the chances for a healthy baby. What you do before you are pregnant can affect your pregnancy! In addition to eating right, exercising, and getting plenty of rest, there are five things you can do before getting pregnant to have a healthy pregnancy and to reduce your risk of having a baby with a birth defect.

1. Start taking 0.4 mg (400 mcg.) of folic acid every day now, because it takes some time for your body to build up proper stores of this important B-vitamin. It is important to take it before conception and early in pregnancy, since these defects occur in the first month of pregnancy before most women even realize they are pregnant.
2. See your health care provider for a checkup, and make sure you have had all your immunizations, especially for rubella (German measles). If you are taking a prescribed medication, be sure your health care provider and pharmacist know that you are planning to become pregnant since some medications may be harmful to you or your baby during pregnancy.
3. If you smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs--STOP! These substances can threaten the health of your baby, and your own health, too.
4. Stay away from toxic chemicals at home and at work--including insecticides, solvents (like some cleaners or paint thinners), lead, and mercury. Read the labels before using chemicals, and do not be afraid to ask your health care provider if you have questions!

5. If you have a cat, do not handle the cat litter--it can carry "toxoplasmosis," a kind of bacteria that can cause birth defects. If possible, take a break from this chore while you are pregnant! Also, wear gloves while gardening in areas that cats may visit and while handling uncooked meats.

**Q. I DID NOT DO THOSE THINGS BEFORE AND MY OTHER CHILDREN ARE JUST FINE. WHY SHOULD I WORRY NOW?**

A. Each pregnancy is a unique experience. While women who have already had children with birth defects may be at higher risk than others, most birth defects occur in pregnancies of women who have not had an affected pregnancy before. Three to 4% of all babies are born with a major birth defect. While only some women will ever have children with birth defects, there is no way of knowing in advance which women these will be. That is why it is so important that all women stay as healthy as possible, even if they have not had any problems before. If you have already had a baby with a birth defect, consult your doctor before trying to become pregnant again.

**Q. I AM IN MY LATE 30S, AND I WANT TO HAVE A CHILD NOW. SHOULD I DO SOMETHING SPECIAL?**

A. Maternal age is one of the risk factors for certain types of birth defects. It is even more important for women who are in their 30s or 40s to see their health care providers before pregnancy and to go for regular prenatal visits throughout the pregnancy.

**Q. I AM PREGNANT NOW, AND I WANT TO BE SURE THAT I DO EVERYTHING RIGHT FOR MY BABY. WHAT CAN I DO WHILE I AM PREGNANT TO HELP ENSURE MY BABY'S HEALTH?**

A. In addition to all the things that you can do before you are pregnant, one of the most important things you can do while you are expecting is to see your health care provider regularly. Prenatal care can help detect problems early in the pregnancy so that conditions can be monitored or treated before birth. Secondary problems or complications might be avoided with good prenatal care, and delivery can be scheduled at the medical facilities best equipped to handle any suspected problems.

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Date Published: 2000-09-21

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