

# **Pregnancy: Taking care of you and your baby**

## **Is prenatal care important?**

Yes! You can help make sure that you and your baby will be healthy by following some simple guidelines and checking in regularly with your doctor.

## **What will happen during prenatal visits?**

Your doctor will probably start by talking to you about your medical history and how you've been feeling. You'll probably be weighed and have your blood pressure taken on every visit.

On your first visit, you'll also probably have a pelvic exam to check the size and shape of your uterus (womb) and a Pap smear to check for signs of cancer of the cervix (the opening of the uterus).

Urine and blood tests may be done on the first visit and again later. Urine tests are done to check for bacteria in your urine, high sugar levels (which can be a sign of diabetes) and high protein levels (which can put you at risk for preeclampsia, a type of high blood pressure in pregnancy). Blood tests are done to check for low iron levels (anemia).

Sometimes, an ultrasound may be done to help figure out when your baby is due or to check on your baby's growth and position in your uterus. Ultrasound uses sound waves to create an image of your baby on a video screen.

Other tests may be needed if you or your baby are at risk for any problems.

## **How much weight should I gain during pregnancy?**

About 25 to 30 pounds. If you don't weigh enough when you get pregnant, you may need to gain more. If you're very heavy when you get pregnant, you may need to gain only 15 to 18 pounds.

Pregnancy isn't the time to diet! It's best to gain about 2 to 3 pounds during the first 12 weeks and about 1 pound a week after that. Talk to your doctor about how much weight you should gain.

## **What should I eat?**

What you eat feeds your baby, so choose healthy foods and skip the junk. You need about 300 extra calories each day. Be sure to include the following in your daily diet:

- 3 servings of milk or dairy products
- 4 servings of vegetables
- 3 servings of fruit
- 9 servings of breads, cereals, rice or pasta
- 2 to 3 servings of meat, fish, poultry, dried beans, eggs or nuts
- At least 6 to 8 glasses of liquids

You can get all the nutrients you need through what you eat. But your doctor may suggest taking prenatal mineral and vitamin pills that include iron to help protect you against anemia, calcium to help keep your bones strong and folic acid, especially early in pregnancy (even before you get pregnant), to help prevent neural tube defects (serious problems with the brain and spinal cord).

### **Is it okay to take medicine?**

Check with your doctor before taking any medicine, including aspirin. Even medicine you can buy without a prescription can cause birth defects, especially during the first three months of pregnancy.

### **How long can I keep working?**

This depends on if you have any problems with your pregnancy, what kind of work you do and if you're exposed to anything at work that could harm your baby. For instance, lifting heavy objects or standing for long periods can be hard on you. Radiation, lead and other heavy metals, such as copper and mercury, could be damaging. Working in front of a computer screen is not thought to cause harm to an unborn baby.

### **What about exercise?**

Unless you have problems in your pregnancy, you can probably do whatever exercise you did before you got pregnant. You may feel better if you're active. Some women say exercising during pregnancy makes labor and delivery easier. Walking and swimming are great choices. If you didn't exercise before pregnancy, start slowly. It's probably best to avoid anything that could cause you to fall, such as water skiing or rock climbing.

### **Is it okay to have sex?**

Yes, unless your doctor believes you're at risk for problems. Don't be surprised if you're less--or more--interested in sex. As you get larger, you may find you need to try different positions, such as lying on your side or being on top. If you have oral sex, tell your partner not to blow air into your vagina. This could force air inside you.

### **What can I do to feel better?**

Here are the most common discomforts of pregnancy and some tips for handling them:

**Morning sickness.** Nausea or vomiting may strike anytime during the day (or night). Try eating frequent, small meals, and avoid greasy foods. Keep crackers by your bed to eat before getting up.

Talk to your doctor if morning sickness lasts past the first 3 months of pregnancy or causes you to lose weight. Interestingly, women with lots of morning sickness rarely miscarry.

**Tiredness.** Sometimes tiredness in pregnancy is caused by anemia, so tell your doctor. Get enough rest. Take a daytime nap if possible.

**Leg cramps.** Gently stretch the calf of your leg by curling your toes upward, toward your knee.

**Constipation.** Drink plenty of fluids. Eat foods with lots of fiber, such as raisins and bran cereal. Don't take laxatives without talking to your doctor first. Stool softeners may be safer than laxatives.

**Hemorrhoids.** Don't strain during bowel movements. Try to avoid becoming constipated. Clean yourself well after a bowel movement (wet wipes may be less irritating than toilet paper). Take several warm soaks (sitz baths) a day.

**Urinating more.** You may need to urinate more often as your baby grows because he or she will put pressure on your bladder. This can't be helped.

**Varicose veins.** Avoid clothing that fits tightly around your legs or waist. Rest and put your feet up as much as you can. Move around if you must stand for long periods. Ask your doctor about support hose.

**Moodiness.** Your hormones are on a roller coaster ride for nine months. Plus, your life is undergoing a big change. Don't be too hard on yourself. If you feel very sad or think about suicide, talk to your doctor.

**Heartburn.** Eat frequent, small meals often. Avoid spicy or greasy foods. Don't lie down right after eating. Ask your doctor about taking antacids.

**Yeast infections.** The amount of discharge from the vagina increases during pregnancy. But yeast infections, which can also cause discharge, are more common during pregnancy. So it's a good idea to talk with your doctor about any unusual discharge.

**Bleeding gums.** Brush and floss regularly, and see your dentist for cleanings. Don't put off dental visits because you're pregnant. But be sure to tell your dentist you're pregnant.

**Stuffy nose.** This is related to changes in the levels of the female hormone estrogen. You may also have nosebleeds.

**Edema (retaining fluid).** Rest with your legs up. Lie on your left side while sleeping so blood flows from your legs back to your heart better. Reduce the amount of salt you eat if salt seems to make you retain fluid. Don't use diuretics (water pills).

## **Skin changes**

Stretch marks appear as red marks on your skin. Lotion can help keep your skin moist and may help reduce the itchiness of dry skin. Stretch marks really can't be prevented but they often fade after giving birth.

Other skin changes may include darkening of the skin on your face and around your nipples, and a dark line below your belly button. Staying out of the sun or using a sunscreen may help lessen these marks. They'll probably fade after you have your baby.

## **Call your doctor if you have:**

- Blood or fluid coming from your vagina
- Sudden or extreme swelling of your face or fingers
- Headaches that are severe or won't go away
- Nausea and vomiting that won't go away
- Dizziness

- Dim or blurry vision
- Pain or cramps in your lower abdomen
- Chills or fever
- A change in your baby's movements
- Less urine or burning when you urinate
- Any illness or infection
- Anything that bothers you

## **Warnings**

"Don't do this, don't do that." You've probably heard every old wives' tale. Here are some warnings worth heeding:

- Don't smoke. Smoking raises your risk for miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight and many other problems.
- Don't use drugs. Cocaine, heroin and marijuana increase your risk of miscarriage, premature birth and birth defects. And your baby could be born addicted to the drug you've been taking.
- Don't drink alcohol. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is the major cause of birth defects that could be prevented, including mental slowness.
- Don't clean your cat's litter box, or eat raw or undercooked red meat. You could get toxoplasmosis, a disease that can cause birth defects.
- Don't sit in the sauna or hot tub. This raises your risk of miscarriage and birth defects.
- Don't douche with a hand-held bulb. This could force air into you, which can cause problems with pregnancy

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