

# Information for Couples

## Planning a Pregnancy



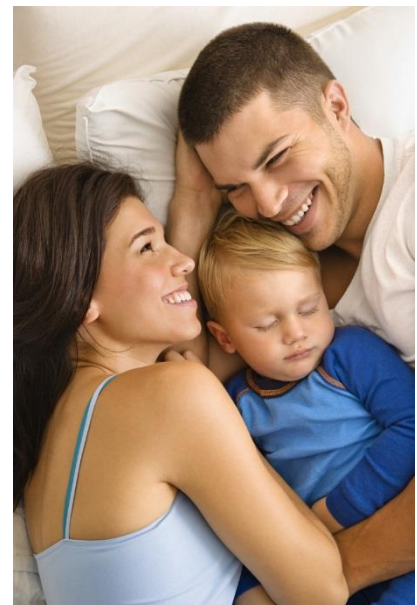
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If you are thinking about pregnancy, **pre-conception care** is important. The preconception period (three months prior to pregnancy) is the time to make life changes for you and your partner that can help boost fertility, reduce problems during pregnancy and assist in recovery from birth. This booklet will provide you and your partner with information regarding maintaining a healthy lifestyle, reducing alcohol consumption and smoking, eating well and exercising moderately.

### It's in the family...

Couples who are thinking about having a child may consider genetic *before conception* to predict any possible abnormalities in their child. The most common severe inherited genetic problem is cystic fibrosis (CF), and about one person in 25 carries a gene for CF. When both parents carry a CF gene, there is a high chance that their baby might have CF. Other types of genetic problems include spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), and there are other problems.

**All couples who are considering pregnancy should think about being tested for CF genes.**



People who are at increased risk of passing genetic abnormalities on to their children include:

- People with family histories of inherited disorders, or those who have previously had children with genetic disorders.
- Jews of Eastern European descent, who may have a high risk of having children with Tay-Sachs or Canavan's, metabolic disorders that lead to death in early childhood.
- Couples of Southeast Asian or Mediterranean origin, who are at increased risk of having children with thalassemia, a severe form of anemia.
- Couples who have family members with birth defects or severe developmental problems.

It is important to remember that **the great majority of children are born healthy and well**, but couples planning a pregnancy have the opportunity to think about their family history, and should always remember that some inherited problems can occasionally occur unexpectedly (cystic fibrosis being the most common example) and testing is available for this before trying.

## *For Mothers-to-be...*

Planning for pregnancy, and pregnancy itself, can be an exciting time. For some people however, there is a delay between making the decision to have a baby and actually getting pregnant. Difficulties in conception can be due to either male or female problems.

A woman's fertility largely depends on her age, with men having a less obvious age-related decrease in fertility. A woman is most fertile between the ages of 17 and 25, with a gradual decline into her 30s and a sharp decrease in fertility after the age of 35. Even for a couple in their 20s it can be normal to take up to a year to conceive.

### *Stop smoking, minimise alcohol consumption*

Women and men who smoke take longer to conceive than non-smokers, and pregnant women who smoke have a higher risk of miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy outside the uterus), premature birth and stillbirth. Babies born to smoking mothers also have a greater risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

As no amount of alcohol is known to be safe during pregnancy, it is recommended that women avoid alcohol altogether when pregnant. Excessive alcohol consumption in pregnancy can cause serious harm to an unborn baby, including brain damage, with binge drinking being most harmful. Excessive alcohol consumption can also reduce male fertility.

### *Diet and Exercise*

Exercise regularly, eat a healthy balanced diet, take folate and limit caffeine. Women who are a healthy weight often find it easier to conceive and have fewer problems during pregnancy. Male fertility can also be improved through regular exercise. It is safe for women to exercise moderately throughout pregnancy, but it is recommended they do not go water skiing, scuba diving, or use water slides. Raising body temperature by doing prolonged exercise or the use of saunas can also be harmful when you are pregnant.

Having a healthy diet can help improve fertility for men and women, and is especially important for an unborn baby. A balanced diet includes foods rich in calcium, iron and folate such as dairy foods, fruit and vegetables, wholegrain bread and cereals. Diets containing iodine (found in seafood and iodised salt) reduce the risk of thyroid disease in mother and baby.

Folate is important for a baby's developing brain and spinal cord. In addition to eating well, it is recommended that women who are planning a pregnancy take a supplement of folate (0.5 mg per day) in the 4-6 weeks before conception and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy to help prevent their baby being born with neural tube defects.



### *About caffeine...*

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, cola and some other soft drinks including energy drinks, chocolate and chocolate drinks. Some studies have linked high caffeine intake in pregnancy with miscarriage, premature birth and stillbirth. As there is uncertainty about what is a safe level of caffeine during pregnancy, try to cut down if you drink a lot of coffee, tea or soft drinks.

## Looking after your general health

If your **Pap smear** is due, it is advisable to have it done and know the results **before** trying to get pregnant, as changes to the cervix can be difficult to treat during pregnancy. Women can also have testing for sexually transmissible infections (STIs) such as chlamydia if they are concerned. As many people with an STI have no symptoms, it is possible to have one and not know it. For this reason it is a good idea for both partners to consider testing before trying to conceive, as STIs can be passed on to a baby at birth with serious consequences.

Pregnant women should be **immunised against rubella** (German measles) and **chickenpox**, as both can lead to serious complications for unborn babies if caught by their mother during pregnancy. Even if you have been vaccinated in the past for rubella you should have a blood test to check you are still immune. If you are not immune and need to have a vaccination, it is advised you do not get pregnant for one month afterwards to avoid potential harm to the baby. If you have had chicken pox as a child you don't need to be vaccinated. If you are unsure, immunity can be confirmed with a blood test.

As **whooping cough** can cause a serious infection in very young babies, it is **recommended that parents-to-be get vaccinated against it**. The same goes for **influenza**.

**If you are planning a pregnancy, see a dentist for a check-up, as fillings and x-rays are best done before you conceive.**

Women with **diabetes** should make sure their sugar control is good before trying to get pregnant, as special medical attention to control blood sugar levels is required to reduce the risk of harm to the baby. If you are taking any medication or health supplements on a regular basis, tell a doctor or pharmacist that you are planning a pregnancy, as some can affect fertility and cause problems during pregnancy.

Women planning a pregnancy and pregnant women should avoid exposure to pesticides, heavy metals (lead and mercury) and industrial chemicals.

### Emotions...

Trying for pregnancy, and being pregnant, can be stressful. Make sure any psychological or problems are assessed and managed early, both for you and your partner. Get plenty of rest and clear your head!



# Something for Fathers-to-be...

## Some ways to help improve fertility

There is plenty you can do to improve the health of sperm. Here are some ideas to help:

1. Maintain a healthy weight – being overweight can affect sperm quality.
2. Don't smoke or take recreational drugs, as both can affect sperm health and may impair your sex drive. Partners of male smokers also have an increased risk of miscarriage.
3. Ensure you don't drink more than eight standard alcoholic drinks per week.
4. Some prescription medications can affect sperm health, so check with your GP.
5. Warm temperatures can affect the testes ability to make sperm. Avoid spas, saunas, hot baths and putting a laptop on your lap.
6. Eat well. A healthy balanced diet provides your body with all the essential vitamins and minerals it needs to encourage healthy sperm production.
7. Regular ejaculation helps increase the quality of sperm. Have sex at least two to three times a week.



## Summing Up...

Any couple planning a pregnancy should take some simple steps to maximise that chance things will go well.

Planning for pregnancy should include consideration of whether a couple wish for any genetic testing, for example for cystic fibrosis.

Take some time to become as healthy as possible, and attend to issues such as immunisation, Pap smears, and making sure that other health issues such as diabetes are well-controlled.

Good luck!

## An important note...

The information contained in this leaflet designed as a **general guide only**, and is provided for educational purposes only. It is not intended, nor implied to be, a substitute for personalised medical advice tailored to your own circumstances. You assume full responsibility for how you choose to use the information provided here.



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