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# Becoming A Parent

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**Information to consider if you are  
thinking about becoming pregnant**

## **THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET**

is to provide individuals and couples with helpful and practical information to use when making the decision to have a child. While the information is particularly useful for those considering a first pregnancy, it is also intended for those who already have children.

Within this booklet the term "Health Care Provider" is used to refer to the variety of professionals involved with providing perinatal health care, including physicians, nurses, social workers, dietitians, and health educators. "Perinatal Care" refers to the continuum of health care from the few months before pregnancy through the baby's first year of life.

## BECOMING A PARENT

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One of the most important decisions you will ever make is whether or not to become a parent. The challenges of pregnancy and parenthood can be exciting and rewarding when they are approached with thoughtful decision-making and preparation.

If you prepare for each pregnancy, you will choose health practices which increase the chances of a healthy pregnancy and infant, and you will be more likely to recognize and accept the responsibilities of parenthood.

If you choose not to become a parent, you can decide which steps are necessary to be sure that you do not have an unintended pregnancy.



# THE RESPONSIBILITY IS YOURS

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When you make the decision to become pregnant, you are making the decision to become parents.

This decision should be made knowing that the responsibility for a healthy pregnancy and birth, and the responsibility for raising your child rests primarily with you, the parents to be.

There are several things you can do to meet this responsibility through active planning and preparation before conception.

- ***Inform yourself*** about the factors that affect pregnancy and birth.
- ***Investigate*** the skills and qualities necessary to be a caring and supportive parent.
- ***Work with*** your health care provider to minimize the effect of any risk factors you may have.
- ***Strive for*** your best state of physical and emotional health.

## YOUR DECISION

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The decision to become parents is personal and private. While you are deciding, you may find it helpful to talk with others including friends, counselors or clergy. You can learn from their perspectives and share the hopes, fears and dreams you might have about pregnancy and parenthood.

Several factors can influence the decision if and when to become pregnant and to become parents:

### HEALTH STATUS

Physical health is very important during pregnancy when the baby is developing. You may have a medical condition that can affect your decision to become pregnant. Talk with your health care provider to determine if your medical condition may affect your pregnancy, or if your pregnancy may affect your health.

Parenting is physically demanding. Develop habits that will keep you in good health.

### FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

It is important to consider your ability to provide for the basic needs of your family. These needs include health care, good food, safe housing, clothing, education, transportation and recreation.

### EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

A parent's emotional maturity affects the quality of parenting a child will receive. You need to be able to nurture, love, and support your child.

Only you can determine the reasons that you want to become a parent. Some reasons often lead to disappointment. Wanting someone to love or having a child so your partner will stay with you are examples of potentially disappointing reasons.

## CAREER GOALS

Your career goals may affect when and if you decide to become parents. Factors to consider are travel, required overtime, flexibility of scheduling work hours, child care and leave of absence with or without pay.

## SUPPORT NETWORK

The challenges of parenting can be more easily met and the joys enhanced, when you have the strength and support of your partner, family and friends. Having and caring for a child will affect these relationships. Old patterns change and new patterns emerge. Think and talk about how a child will affect your relationships.

## AGE

Age is a factor to consider, especially if you are a teenager or over the age of 35. Talk to your health care provider about how your age might affect your decision to become pregnant.



# WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU? SOME POSSIBILITIES...

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## NOT TO BECOME A PARENT

After thinking about your options, you may decide not to become a parent. You may consider this the "best" decision for you. It is still important for you to maintain good health habits and to receive regular health care.

Consider all of the medically safe and effective contraceptive options available to you. Make an informed choice that is right for you. Your alternatives include abstinence, or permanent or temporary contraceptive options.

Decisions regarding parenthood can and do change over time. Protect your health as well as your pregnancy options in case your decision changes in the future.

## TO DELAY PARENTHOOD

There is no single right time for pregnancy and parenthood. There are times and circumstances, however, that are more conducive than others to healthy pregnancy, birth and parenthood.

Should you decide to delay parenthood (or if you are uncertain about parenthood), you can use this time to:

**Maintain** or improve your general health, including medically safe and effective contraception options.

**Adopt** positive health habits conducive to a healthy pregnancy and birth at some later time in your life.

**Consider** the skills and qualities for becoming a caring and supportive parent.

**Learn** about and **reduce** your exposure to hazards in your home or workplace that can harm your fertility, future pregnancy and birth.



## THE DECISION TO BECOME A PARENT

The following ***Preconception Checklist*** describes seven basic steps you can take if you have made the decision to become a parent. Following these will help you plan and prepare for a healthy pregnancy and can increase your confidence and sense of control as you approach this exciting phase of your life.

### PRECONCEPTION CHECKLIST

1. Complete a preconception risk assessment.
2. Develop your pregnancy plans.
3. Meet with your health care provider.
4. Adopt the recommended health practices.
5. Assess possible changes in your lifestyle and relationships.
6. Review your expectations about parenthood.
7. Maintain your fertility awareness.

Each of these steps is explained in the following pages.



# 1. COMPLETE A PRECONCEPTION CHECKLIST

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A *Preconception Checklist* is included with this booklet. It is designed to identify risk factors that may affect your personal health, pregnancy, birth and parenthood. Both you and your partner should complete one of these forms and share them with your health care provider.

## 2. DEVELOP YOUR PREGNANCY PLANS

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Pregnancy can be an exciting and fulfilling time for a woman and her partner. Explore the prenatal care, birth and delivery options available in your community. Will you attend childbirth education classes? Will your partner accompany you during the prenatal visits? Do you have any preferences regarding prenatal tests, or pain control during labor? Will your partner or others attend your delivery?

If you are uncertain about these and other options, discuss the subject with friends who have had a child, co-workers, a childbirth educator, and your health care provider.

### REVIEW YOUR HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE

Determine if your health insurance coverage is adequate for your perinatal care. Your health insurance may also affect your choice of a health care provider.

If you do not have health insurance, or if your insurance is inadequate, explore options for paying for your health care. Your alternatives may include self payment for publicly-funded health and nutrition programs.

### CHOOSE A HEALTH CARE PROVIDER

If you do not have a provider, make an appointment and meet with a prospective health care provider before you choose one. Determine ahead of time if there is a charge for this meeting. Your choice of a health care provider may involve other considerations such as:

#### PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH PHILOSOPHY

It is important that you are comfortable with the philosophy, attitudes and manners of your health care provider and the other providers with whom he/she works. Choose a health care provider who is supportive of the type of prenatal care, birth and delivery experience you prefer, and who is approachable and available for questions and consultation.



## YOUR HEALTH STATUS AND RISK FACTORS

Health care providers, clinics and hospitals have different capabilities and resources to deal with specific risk conditions. Your primary health care provider can advise you on the level of care most appropriate for you.

## HOSPITAL AFFILIATIONS

If you prefer to deliver at a specific hospital, choose a health care provider who has privileges at that hospital. Selecting a hospital may also involve such factors as: your insurance coverage; location and facilities; hospital policies; and labor, delivery and postpartum options. If you are undecided, a tour of the hospital may be helpful.

### 3. MEET WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER

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Schedule a visit with the health care provider you select and do the following:

Discuss your pregnancy plans and preferences.

Review the information on your personal ***Preconception Checklist***.

Obtain recommended preconceptional health care services including:

- A preconception physical assessment
- A medical evaluation of any pre-existing conditions (asthma, seizures, depression, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.)
- Immunizations for vaccine preventable diseases such as rubella (German Measles), hepatitis and tetanus
- Laboratory tests including blood typing
- An evaluation of all medications and drugs you currently use



## 4. ADOPT THE RECOMMENDED HEALTH PRACTICES

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The following recommended health practices can help reduce your exposure to potential reproductive hazards and improve your reproductive and general health. Begin these healthy practices before you get pregnant. Discuss these recommendations with your health care provider.

### DON'T SMOKE

Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, low birth weight and infant death. Babies who are smaller than normal may have more problems after delivery and may show developmental delays as they grow.

The more you smoke, the greater the risk.

### DON'T DRINK ALCOHOL

Mental retardation and developmental problems have been associated with the use of alcohol during pregnancy. Alcohol can also interfere with your nutritional needs.

There is no known, absolutely safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

### DON'T USE RECREATIONAL OR STREET DRUGS

Drugs such as marijuana and cocaine have been associated with birth defects. There is also a risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, fetal distress and low birth weight.

### CONTACT YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER BEFORE TAKING MEDICATIONS

Inform your health care provider before taking medications, especially if you suspect you may be pregnant. Discuss medical conditions requiring the regular use of medications, before becoming pregnant. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines, dietary supplements and any other drugs.

Some medications may cause fetal abnormalities when taken during pregnancy. Your health care provider can advise you about the safe use of medications.

### REDUCE CAFFEINE

Caffeine is a stimulant. Excessive amounts can increase irritability and nervousness of both you and your baby.

### STABILIZE WEIGHT BEFORE CONCEPTION

Stop dieting before you become pregnant. Diets intended to decrease weight tend to be low in carbohydrates and protein; this can contribute to low birth weight babies.

## IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF YOUR DIET

An adequate and well balanced diet is necessary for proper prenatal development. A well balanced diet provides the recommended level of all necessary nutrients.

Your diet should include the following:

- At least six servings of grain products such as bread, cereal and pasta
- At least five servings of fruits and vegetables
- Two to three servings of milk and dairy products
- Two to three servings of protein such as meat, eggs and legumes

Your health care provider can refer you to a nutritionist to help you plan a healthier diet.

## TAKE AN ADEQUATE AMOUNT OF FOLIC ACID

Taking the recommended amount of folic acid before and during pregnancy can reduce the risk of specific birth defects (neural tube defects). Take a multivitamin with 400mcg. of folic acid every day.

## SEE YOUR DENTIST AND MAINTAIN GOOD ORAL HEALTH

Some dental care requires the use of x-rays, medications or surgical procedures. Your dentist will advise you if this type of dental care should be done before you become pregnant.

Continue good oral health practices before and during pregnancy. Gum disease or infection may have a harmful effect on your pregnancy.

## DISCONTINUE CONTRACEPTION

Discontinue oral contraceptives and use another method of contraception until normal ovulation and menstrual periods are reestablished.

## REMAIN ALERT TO REPRODUCTIVE RISKS

Your home or workplace may contain hazards to you and to your baby. Reduce your exposure to these potential risks. Examples of these are listed under the Occupational and Environmental Exposures Section on the enclosed ***Preconception Checklist***. Inform your employer if you suspect you are pregnant and may come in contact with any potential reproductive risks. It is illegal for your employer to treat you unfairly because you are pregnant.

Because you could be pregnant and not yet be aware of it, tell your health care providers that you are trying to become pregnant. This is especially important before any procedures such as x-rays, surgery or medication use.

## **5. ASSESS POSSIBLE CHANGES IN YOUR LIFESTYLE AND RELATIONSHIPS**

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Anticipate the adjustments you will need to make during pregnancy, as well as lifestyle changes as a parent. Discuss these changes with your partner and the other important persons in your life.

## **6. REVIEW YOUR EXPECTATIONS ABOUT PARENTHOOD**

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Discuss with your partner what is required of parents and how both of you will meet these requirements. You might have different opinions about balancing home, job and child care responsibilities.

## **7. MAINTAIN YOUR FERTILITY AWARENESS**

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### **IDENTIFY OVULATION**

Fertility awareness techniques can enable you to identify ovulation before and during the cycle when you are ready to become pregnant.

Fertility awareness techniques include observing changes in cervical mucus and basal body temperatures. Your health care provider can teach you how to identify these changes.

People differ in the length of time it takes to get pregnant. If conception has not occurred after attempting to get pregnant for six months to one year, you may want to talk with your health care provider.

### **BE ALERT FOR SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PREGNANCY**

The most common indicators of early pregnancy include:

- a delay of your menstrual period
- nausea
- excess fatigue
- breast tenderness
- frequent urination.

Not all women experience these symptoms to the same degree.

## OBTAIN AN EARLY PREGNANCY TEST

Highly sensitive pregnancy tests can determine a pregnancy within several days of a missed menstrual period. Pregnancy test kits are available for purchase from pharmacies, your health care provider, or family planning clinic.

## CONFIRM YOUR PREGNANCY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND BEGIN YOUR PRENATAL CARE IMMEDIATELY

If you are pregnant, it is very important that you receive ongoing prenatal care throughout the pregnancy. Your health care provider will advise you of your schedule of prenatal appointments.

## PLAN, ANTICIPATE AND ENJOY

The purpose of this booklet is to help you plan and prepare for a healthy pregnancy and the birth of a healthy baby. We hope that it has increased your enthusiasm for pregnancy and parenthood. The steps you take to prepare for your child before conception should give you a sense of satisfaction, for you have already begun to recognize and fulfill your parental responsibilities. Congratulations and Best Wishes!



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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One of the rights and responsibilities you have as a consumer in the health care system is to receive information that will help you to prepare for pregnancy and parenthood.\*

You will find it useful to obtain additional information in areas such as:

- recommended health care practices
- prenatal health care services
- fetal growth and development
- parenting

For more information contact your health care provider or



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\*An example of rights and responsibilities of perinatal patients has been developed by the International Childbirth Education Association, Inc. (ICEA), P.O. Box 20048, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55420.

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The Preconception Committee is indebted to Dr. Thomas A. Leonard for the inspiration and guidance he gave to the committee as they prepared the original booklet. Dr. Leonard died in 1988 at the age of 91. Dr. Leonard was an obstetrician who dedicated his life to the care of pregnant women in Wisconsin. His belief was that every baby should have the privilege of being born healthy and wanted.

## SOME WORDS USED IN THIS BOOKLET

***Abstinence:*** Not having sexual intercourse.

***Basal Body Temperature:*** Refers to a way to know when ovulation occurs by measuring body temperature. Most women have a slight rise in their normal body temperature after ovulation.

***Carbohydrates:*** Refers to foods that have starch or sugar, such as breads, cereals, rice, potatoes, and pasta.

***Conception:*** Refers to becoming pregnant.

***Contraceptive Choice:*** A method of birth control a person chooses that prevents pregnancy.

***Health Care Provider:*** Refers to physicians, nurses, social workers, dietitians, and health educators.

***Nutrients:*** Ingredients in foods that we need for good health.

***Ovulation:*** The time in a woman's menstrual cycle when an egg is released from her ovary

***Perinatal Health Care:*** Refers to health care from the few months before a woman gets pregnant, through the baby's first year of life.

***Postpartum:*** The time after birth.

***Preconception:*** Refers to the time when a person is preparing to become pregnant.

***Protein:*** Refers to nitrogen-containing foods such as meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts.

***Rubella:*** Commonly called "German measles." Vaccines are available to prevent the illness.

OTHER WORDS YOU WANT YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER TO EXPLAIN:





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Perinatal Care

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