

# PATIENT EDUCATION



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

## Having a baby

**P**regnancy and childbirth change your life. When you are pregnant, you must care for and think about two people—yourself and your baby.

*This pamphlet explains*

- why **prenatal care** is important
- some changes you may need to make during pregnancy
- how to plan for your baby and your future

### Prenatal Care

As soon as you think you may be pregnant, call your health care professional to set up an appointment. Prenatal care is the health care you get while you are pregnant. It includes medical care, education, and counseling. The earlier you get prenatal care, the better your chances are for a healthy pregnancy and baby.

If you need help getting prenatal care, talk to your doctor, nurse, or school counselor. If you do not have the money for prenatal care or a way to get to an office or clinic, there are groups at schools or in your community that can assist you.

### Visits With Your Health Care Professional

At your first prenatal visit, your health care professional will ask you many questions. You will be asked the date of the first day of your last menstrual period. Your health care professional uses this date to figure out how many weeks pregnant you are and estimate when your baby will be born (your due date). A pregnancy is measured in weeks. A normal pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks. It is divided into **trimesters**: first, second, and third. A trimester lasts about 3 months.

You will have a complete physical exam, which may include a **pelvic exam**. If you have never had

a pelvic exam, ask your health care professional to explain it to you. You also may have a urine test and some blood tests. You may be tested for certain **sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**.

As your pregnancy continues, you will visit your health care professional more often. At your visits, your health care professional can answer any questions you may have. He or she will check on your health and the health of your **fetus**. A pelvic exam is not needed at each visit unless you are having complications.

An important thing to discuss at one of your prenatal visits is what kind of **birth control** to use after your baby is born. There are many options for birth control after you have a baby, such as pills, the birth control implant, or the **intrauterine device (IUD)**. Talk to your health care professional about a method that works for you and when to start it. Some methods can be started in the hospital before you go home. You also should use condoms to protect yourself against STIs.

### Childbirth Classes

In childbirth classes, you can learn more about pregnancy, giving birth, breastfeeding, and being a parent. There may be special classes for pregnant teens. There also are classes that can teach you how

to take care of your baby. This includes how to feed, diaper, and bathe your baby and how to keep your baby healthy and safe. You can ask other mothers, family members, or health care staff to teach you, too.

## Changes You May Need to Make

Being a good parent begins even before your baby is born. Your baby's health depends a lot on how you take care of yourself during pregnancy. It is important to eat healthy foods, exercise regularly, and get plenty of rest. You should avoid things that could harm your fetus, such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and illegal drugs. You also need to talk to your health care professional about any prescription drugs you are taking as well as drugs you can buy without a prescription, like vitamins and pain relievers.

### Eating Well

Eating the right food is good for your health and helps your fetus grow. This is the time to make healthy choices. You still can have the food you enjoy, but you may need to make some changes in your diet (see box "Making Healthy Food Choices").

MyPlate ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) is a program that can help you plan a balanced diet. It takes into account your age, sex, height, weight, and physical activity. MyPlate makes it easy to remember what to eat at each meal. One half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables. The other half should be grains and protein foods. You need a small amount of dairy foods at each meal as well.

While you are pregnant, there are some foods you should not eat or eat only in small amounts:

- Certain types of cooked fish—While you are pregnant, avoid shark, tilefish, king mackerel, and swordfish. You should limit albacore tuna (but not "chunk light tuna") to about one small can a week. These fish may have high levels of mercury, which can be harmful during pregnancy. All other types of cooked fish are safe and good for you and your fetus.
- Caffeine—Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, chocolate, energy drinks, and soft drinks. It is a good idea to limit your daily intake of caffeine to less than 200 milligrams, which is the amount in two small cups of brewed coffee. Limiting caffeine can help with nausea and sleep problems.
- Sushi—Raw fish may be harmful during pregnancy. Cooked sushi is fine.
- Unpasteurized milk and cheese—These foods can cause a disease called *listeriosis*. Avoid cheeses that are made with raw milk (such as some feta, queso fresco, and bleu cheeses). Hot dogs and lunch meats also can cause this disease, although it is rare. To be on the safe side, make sure you eat hot dogs and lunch meats that have been heated until steaming hot.

## Making Healthy Food Choices

You still can eat many of your favorite foods while you are pregnant. You just need to make a few changes to make them healthy.

- To get more fruits and vegetables:
  - make sandwiches and hamburgers with lettuce, tomato, and other sliced vegetables
  - put vegetables on your pizza instead of pepperoni or sausage
  - drink 100% fruit juice diluted with water
- To get more whole grains:
  - use whole-grain breads and rolls, rather than white bread
  - add grains like whole-wheat pasta, couscous, or brown rice to salads
- To get more calcium:
  - drink low-fat or nonfat milk or use it on cereal
  - drink orange juice that has calcium added
  - have a container of yogurt or a small piece of cheese for a snack

Some teens need to watch how much weight they gain during pregnancy. Here are some tips on cutting fat and calories:

- Eat fresh fruits and vegetables without sauce or butter.
- Bake, grill, or broil meats, poultry, or fish instead of frying them.
- Eat low-fat yogurt, ice cream, or cottage cheese instead of the full-fat versions.
- Eat baked potatoes without butter or with low-fat sour cream instead of eating french fries or onion rings.
- Snack on fresh or dried fruits or vegetables instead of cookies, chips, or candy bars.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks.
- Avoid oversized portions. Enjoy your food, but eat less.

## Managing Your Weight

Healthy weight gain during pregnancy is important. How much weight you should gain during pregnancy depends on your weight before you were pregnant. If you were underweight, you need to gain as much as 40 pounds. If you were a normal weight, you should gain 25–35 pounds. If you were overweight or obese, you need to gain as little as 11 pounds. Your weight will be checked at every prenatal care visit. If you are

## MyPlate



*MyPlate makes it easier to remember which foods to eat.  
From the U.S. Department of Agriculture.*

gaining too much or too little, you may need to make changes to your diet and exercise plan. It depends on how you are doing and how well your fetus is growing.

If you think you have an eating disorder, tell your health care professional. Now is not the time to hide it. Your health care professional can help.

### **Prenatal Vitamins**

An important vitamin for pregnant women is a B vitamin called folic acid. Getting enough folic acid before and during pregnancy may help prevent major birth defects of the fetus's brain and spine. During pregnancy, you should get 600 micrograms of folic acid daily. Iron also is important. More iron is needed during pregnancy to make extra blood that carries oxygen to your fetus.

One way to get all the vitamins and minerals you need during pregnancy is to take a multivitamin pill. There are special ones for pregnant women. At your first prenatal care visit, tell your health care professional about any other vitamins you have been taking. You may want to bring the bottles with you. Excess amounts of some vitamins can be harmful. Your health care professional will help you decide which vitamin pills to take.

### **Exercise**

Exercise can help give you more energy, help ease some of the discomforts of pregnancy, and make you stronger for labor and delivery. Most teens should exercise 30 minutes or more on most, if not all, days of the week. The 30 minutes do not have to be all at one time. For example, you can do three 10-minute periods of exercise.

If you did not exercise before you were pregnant, start with a few minutes each day and build up to 30 minutes or more. Walking, dancing, and swimming are good forms of exercise. Before you start any exercise program, talk with your health care professional to make sure it is safe for you.

### **Rest**

During early and late pregnancy, it is common to feel very tired. It is important to get plenty of rest while you are pregnant—your body needs 8.5–9.5 hours of sleep each night. Listen to your body. During the day, take breaks and rest when you feel tired. Exercise and a healthy diet may help boost your energy.

### **Medications**

Some teens need to take medicine during pregnancy for their health or for the health of the fetus. Tell your health care professional about any prescription medicines you are taking or bring the bottles with you to your first prenatal visit. Be sure to talk to your health care professional before taking any over-the-counter medicines, herbal remedies, vitamins, or minerals.

### **Alcohol, Tobacco, Marijuana, and Other Illegal Drugs**

Alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs can harm you and your fetus. If you use any of these substances, now is a good time to quit. If you want to stop, but cannot, talk with your health care professional. He or she can help you find ways to quit.

### **Risks of Problems**

Pregnant teens are at higher risk of certain health problems (such as high blood pressure or anemia) than pregnant women who are older. Pregnant teens also are more likely to go into labor too early. This is called **preterm** birth. These risks are even greater for teens who are younger than 15 years or for those who do not get prenatal care.

Teens also are more likely to have STIs. You may have an STI and not know it. If you have sex during pregnancy, you could get an STI. Using a latex condom can help prevent getting or spreading some STIs.

### **Preparing to Be a Mom**

Having a baby means you have to get used to a new way of life. Your baby will need your constant attention. You will not have much time for the things you used to do. You may feel tired, lonely, and frustrated. If you expect these changes, it may be easier to adjust.

You should plan for the costs of raising a baby. You and your baby will need a place to live and money for food, clothing, diapers, and medical care. You also may have other needs, such as a car seat, a stroller, or child care.

Think about whether you want help from the baby's father. Not all fathers want to be involved with their babies, though. The father is required by law to pay for child support. You may want to talk to a social worker, a family member, or your health care professional if you have questions or concerns about involving the baby's father.

## Finding Support

You may have mixed feelings about being pregnant. You may be happy and at the same time scared about the future. You may want to talk to someone you trust about your feelings.

Your parents may be able to support you and help you. If you feel you cannot tell your parents that you are pregnant, it can be helpful to talk with some other adult you trust. If you feel that someone may harm you, or if you want to harm yourself because you are pregnant, talk to a health care professional, a school counselor, or another trusted adult. There are also groups in your community that can provide support and help.

Sometimes teenagers become pregnant after unwanted sexual intercourse. If you are in this situation, your doctor, nurse, or school counselor can get you the help you need.

After the baby is born, you will need support from friends, family, or neighbors. Caring for a baby can be very rewarding. It also is a lot of work and responsibility. Make sure you have someone to call on when you need help and when you need some time for yourself. The baby will be a big part of your life now, but you still need to find some time for yourself.

If you change your mind about raising the baby, adoption is an option. In an adoption, a child legally gets new parents. The baby will get a new birth certificate with the new parents' names on it. You can make arrangements for adoption while you are still pregnant or after the baby is born. If you are interested in adoption, talk to your health care professional or a social worker.

## Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is the best way to feed newborns and infants. Breast milk helps the baby resist diseases and allergies. Breastfeeding also is cheaper than bottle-feeding and may help you return to your prepregnancy weight more quickly. Even breastfeeding only for a few weeks or months has health benefits for the baby.

Do not be surprised if breastfeeding starts off slowly. Both you and the baby need to learn together and get comfortable. If the baby calms down after breastfeeding, makes urine, and is growing, he or she is getting enough milk.

When you go back to school or to work, you can still feed your baby breast milk. You will need to get a breast pump to collect and store milk. Your workplace or school should have a place where you can do this.

## Planning for Your Future

Plan to see your health care professional within the first 3 weeks after your baby is born (the postpartum period). During this visit, your health care professional

will make sure you are healthy and talk about your future health needs. You also should plan for a full postpartum checkup no later than 12 weeks after birth. And you should plan to continue your education.

## The Postpartum Visit

During your postpartum visit, your health care professional will do a complete exam to be sure that you are healing and in good health. This is a good time to ask questions about your future health, breastfeeding, birth control, weight loss, sex, or your emotions. To help you remember everything to talk about, write down any questions you have and bring them with you to this visit.

## Birth Control

It is possible to get pregnant as soon as 4 weeks after having a baby. Make sure you use birth control to prevent pregnancy. Talk to your health care professional about the best method for you.

## Staying in School

Planning for your future also involves finishing school. Finishing your education will help you get a better job, earn more money, and make a better life for you and your baby.

You may need help to stay in school. Ask a counselor about community programs that offer rides to school, child care, or tutoring at home. If you cannot finish high school, you can take classes to prepare for a high school equivalency degree.

## Finally...

Having a baby means facing many new changes and challenges. You have a lot to learn in a very short time and will need extra help and support. Prenatal care and a healthy lifestyle can help you stay healthy and have a healthy baby. Being prepared for your baby and planning for your future can make a big difference in your life and your baby's life. For more information, see the list of resources.

## Resources

*For help finding low- or no-cost health insurance for you and your child, contact*

### Medicaid

[www.medicaid.gov](http://www.medicaid.gov)

Each state has its own Medicaid program. Contact your state's health department for detailed information.

### Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) 800-318-2596

[www.healthcare.gov/medicaid-chip/childrens-health-insurance-program](http://www.healthcare.gov/medicaid-chip/childrens-health-insurance-program)

This program provides low-cost health insurance for children.

*If you need help getting healthy food and health care for you and your child, contact*

### U.S. Department of Agriculture Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/)

You need to apply at your local SNAP office for these benefits. Your state health department can tell you how to locate this office or you can go to the web site to link to your state's SNAP application process.

### Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) [www.fns.usda.gov/wic/](http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/)

Contact your WIC state agency to apply. You can find your state agency on the national web site.

*To find a social worker in your area, contact*

### Help Starts Here [www.helpstartshere.org](http://www.helpstartshere.org)

## Glossary

**Birth Control:** Devices or medications used to prevent pregnancy.

**Fetus:** The stage of human development beyond 8 completed weeks after fertilization.

**Intrauterine Device (IUD):** A small device that is inserted and left inside the uterus to prevent pregnancy.

**Listeriosis:** A type of illness you can get from bacteria found in unpasteurized milk, hot dogs, luncheon meats, and smoked seafood.

**Pelvic Exam:** A physical examination of a woman's pelvic organs.

**Prenatal Care:** A program of care for a pregnant woman before the birth of her baby.

**Preterm:** Less than 37 weeks of pregnancy.

**Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):** Infections that are spread by sexual contact.

**Trimesters:** The 3-month periods of time in pregnancy. They are referred to as first, second, or third.

This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) to ensure accuracy.

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