

Planning your pregnancy



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Planning for pregnancy can be a wonderful time, but it can also be quite difficult for some families. In this leaflet we give you some information around looking after yourself and how lifestyle factors can impact on getting pregnant and having a healthy pregnancy.

If you are trying for a baby there are things you can do to help make sure you have a safe, comfortable pregnancy and that your child is healthy. Think about the lifestyle factors that might affect your ability to get pregnant and have a healthy pregnancy. This includes the age at which you plan to start your family. We know complications are more common in women over 35 years, including stillbirth and neonatal death.

This applies to men too.

You are more likely to get pregnant if you are both in good health.



Vitamins

Certain vitamins are important for the healthy development of a baby. This is why we recommend taking supplements to make sure you are getting enough of these important vitamins.

Folic acid

Folic acid can reduce the risk of neural tube defects (NTDs) such as spina bifida. Most women need to take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily for 12 weeks before becoming pregnant and up to the twelfth week of pregnancy. You can get these tablets from a supermarket or pharmacist at a low cost. Some people will need a higher dose of folic acid. If any of the following apply to you, ask your GP for more advice as you will need a higher dose of folic acid (5mg) which is only available on prescription:

- previously had a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect;
- family history of neural tube defects;
- coeliac disease;
- sickle cell disease;
- diabetes;
- you take anti-epileptic medicines;
- you have a BMI over 30.

If you get pregnant unexpectedly and have not been taking folic acid supplements, start taking them as soon as you find out, up to the twelfth week of pregnancy.

www.pha.site/folic-acid-leaflet



Vitamin D

To make sure you get enough vitamin D before pregnancy, you should also take 10 micrograms of vitamin D daily and continue this supplement throughout your pregnancy.

www.pha.site/vitamin-d-and-you



You may be entitled to free vitamins during pregnancy through the Healthy Start scheme, check at www.healthystart.nhs.uk

Stopping contraception prior to trying for a baby

You should consider starting folic acid supplements before stopping contraception/having a contraceptive device removed.

There are no long-term effects on fertility with contraceptive pills, coils or implants. Most women return to a regular menstrual cycle in 4-6 weeks after stopping taking the contraceptive pill or having the coil or implant removed.

If you are using injectable contraception, this can take up to one year.

Smoking

Smoking significantly lowers your chances of getting pregnant, increases your chance of miscarriage and, if you continue to smoke during pregnancy, may harm your baby. Protecting your baby from cigarette smoke is one of the best things you can do to give your child the best start in life.

If you or your partner smoke, get advice about stopping. You can improve your chances of quitting by attending a support group or getting support from your partner, family, friends or one of the specialist stop smoking services that are easily available across Northern Ireland. You are up to four times more likely to stop smoking successfully with support. For information on your nearest service visit

www.stopsmokingni.info

Services are offered in many, community pharmacies, HSC Trust premises and community and voluntary organisations.



Alcohol

If you are planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all. Drinking even moderate amounts of alcohol can harm your chances of conceiving. This applies to both men and women, so if you are having trouble conceiving, you should cut out alcohol completely and see if this helps. Drinking alcohol in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to your baby. The more you drink the greater the risk to your baby's physical and mental development. For men, your fertility is unlikely to be affected if your alcohol intake is within the recommended limit of 14 units of alcohol per week. Drinking too much alcohol can affect semen quality.

For help to cut down, talk to your healthcare professional or visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info

Illegal drugs

Using illegal drugs when planning your pregnancy could have a serious effect on you and your ability to become pregnant. This includes cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin. If you are planning to become pregnant, it is important to seek support to stop any drug use.

If you regularly use cocaine, heroin or other similar drugs (opiates or opioids), do not stop or reduce the amount you take without speaking to a healthcare professional/drug treatment service first. It's important to withdraw from these drugs in the right way to reduce the risk of problems for you and your baby. For further information and support please visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info

Medicines, including herbal medicines

If you or your partner take any medication, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about whether it will affect your pregnancy. They will advise whether you can safely continue to take your medication or whether it should be changed to an alternative or stopped. Never stop taking your medication without speaking to your doctor or pharmacist.

Eat a healthy, balanced diet and take regular physical activity

It is important to try to follow a healthy, balanced diet by trying to eat:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables (this can include fresh, frozen, tinned, dried produce, or a glass of juice) – aim for at least five portions a day;
- fibre rich, starchy foods such as wholemeal bread, brown pasta, brown rice and potatoes (keep the skin on where you can);
- protein-rich food such as lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs and pulses (beans and lentils);
- dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, which contain calcium.

You should try to avoid:

- processed foods and foods that are high in fats and sugar;
- sugary snacks and drinks.

www.pha.site/enjoy-healthy-eating



It is important to take regular, moderate exercise so that your body is in good shape for pregnancy.

www.pha.site/eat-well-in-pregnancy



Be a healthy weight

Healthcare providers use a measure of weight called body mass index (BMI).

It can take longer to get pregnant if your BMI is outside the healthy range (19-25). If you are underweight or living with overweight this can impact on your menstrual cycle. Men who have a BMI of 30 or above are likely to have reduced fertility.

If you need help to get to a healthier weight, visit www.choosetolivebetter.com or speak to your doctor or pharmacist.

Sexual health

Some sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can affect fertility or can be passed on to your baby during pregnancy. It is important that you and your partner have both been treated for any infections before planning to conceive. Many STIs do not have any symptoms. If you are at risk of any STIs or have any concerns, seek medical advice or visit www.sexualhealthni.info for further information. You can also get a free STI test online at www.SH24.org.uk

Vaccinations and infections

Some infections such as rubella (German measles) can harm your baby if you catch them during pregnancy. If you are not sure, check with your GP whether you have had two doses of the MMR vaccination. Avoid getting pregnant for a month after having your MMR vaccination.

Make sure you are up to date with vaccines.

For further info visit www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/measles-mumps-rubella-mmr-vaccination-leaflet

Cervical screening

If you are due to have cervical screening (a smear test), you should have this carried out before you try to get pregnant.

If you are invited for a routine smear test while you are pregnant you should tell your GP or clinic you are pregnant. You will usually be advised to reschedule the test for a date around 12 weeks after your baby is born.

Women with existing physical or mental health conditions

If you have an existing physical or mental health condition, for example mental health problems, diabetes or a family history of any inherited diseases, talk to your GP or specialist about getting pregnant.

Where there are treatment options, it is important that your condition is controlled as well as possible before you try to get pregnant.

If you are taking a medication for a condition, don't stop taking it without consulting your doctor.

Relationships

Relationship abuse happens when someone you are in a relationship with hurts or exploits you. Abuse can take many forms, you can be in an abusive relationship experiencing physical, emotional, sexual or financial abuse without being aware of it. If someone in your life is exhibiting behaviour that hurts you, or makes you uncomfortable the situation needs to be reported to protect your safety and wellbeing. You can seek help by contacting the 24 hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline free on 0808 802 1414 or at <https://dsahelpline.org>

Help is also available at www.womensaidni.org

For more information see
www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/trying-for-a-baby

If you have been trying for a baby
for a year without success,
see your GP for advice.



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