

FACT SHEET #9A

GOOD HEALTH BEFORE AND DURING PREGNANCY MAY HELP WOMEN TO PREVENT PRETERM BIRTH AND HAVE HEALTHIER PREGNANCY OUTCOMES

BEFORE PREGNANCY

The childbearing years begin with a woman's first menstrual period and end with menopause. On average that means approximately 40 years that a woman's body is physically capable of becoming pregnant. Many women choose to use some form of birth control to better plan when and if they desire to become pregnant. Women should plan their pregnancies whenever possible and work to establish their own best health prior to getting pregnant. However, this is not always possible: half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned. Women need to be aware that the choices they make each day can affect not only their own health, but also the health of a baby they may conceive without even trying. Serious birth defects that affect a baby's brain and spine occur in the first 28 days of pregnancy—before many women realize that they are pregnant. But women who choose to take a multivitamin *each and every day* routinely—can help to drastically reduce their risk of having a baby with these serious birth defects.

WHAT ELSE CAN CHILDBEARING-AGE WOMEN DO?

- See a doctor for regular yearly check-ups, a pap smear, and breast exams.
- If necessary, see a specialist for any chronic diseases and keep them under control (especially diabetes, low thyroid, and high blood pressure).
- Visit the dentist regularly to prevent dental infections and tooth decay, including dental cleanings every 6 months with the dental hygienist. In addition, brush with a fluoride toothpaste and rinse with an antiseptic mouthwash twice a day, and floss daily.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, daily. Include a variety of foods from each food group, and try to especially eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Fat-free milk and water are also important. Many types of fish are a healthy source of protein for women both before and during pregnancy. However, there are some fish that contain high levels of mercury and those should not be eaten without talking to a health care provider for the latest recommendations.
- Take a multivitamin containing 400 mcg of folic acid daily to help prevent birth defects of the brain and spine. Folic acid is also important for the growth and repair of every cell in the body. All day, every day, your body works hard to replace those lost cells!
- Exercise for 20 minutes, 3 or more times a week. Always check with your health care provider before beginning any exercise program.

- Ideally, a woman should see a doctor for a prepregnancy checkup, **before** she tries to become pregnant. Talking to a health professional about ways to adopt a healthy lifestyle and taking a prenatal vitamin helps increase the chances for having a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby.
- It is best to plan pregnancies. The experts agree that spacing children at least 24 months apart gives a woman's body the time it needs to fully recover from childbirth before becoming pregnant again. For advice about planning pregnancies, a woman can talk to her health care provider or local health department.
- Doctors can answer questions about dangerous environmental substances, such as Lead, that may be found at home or at work, and what to do about them.
- Before a woman becomes pregnant, she should ask her health care provider if she need help with quitting smoking and avoiding alcohol and other drugs.