

Planning a baby?

When you are planning a pregnancy it is important that you are in optimum health, firstly to help your body to conceive, and secondly to maintain the pregnancy and grow a healthy baby. It is true that the baby will take what it needs from your body, but your body needs to be healthy and strong to nurture the growing baby, to give birth and to enable you to feed and care for the baby.

When planning a pregnancy it is advisable to first see your midwife or GP to discuss your plans, this would be particularly important if you have a pre-existing medical condition. It is worth having a rubella (German measles) blood test even if you have had German measles or had the immunisation in the past; for certain population groups further blood testing may also be suggested to exclude sickle cell, thalassaemia or Tay-Sachs disease. Your midwife or GP will check your physical wellbeing, perhaps offer you a cervical smear, check your blood pressure and ensure that there are no hazards to pregnancy in the workplace of both you and your partner.

The current Department of Health (DoH) recommendation is that it is advisable to take a folic acid supplement in the months prior to getting pregnant and for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy – if you don't want to take a supplement it would be worth ensuring that you get additional folic acid in your diet from green vegetables, brown rice and walnuts. Folic acid supplementation has been shown to reduce the risk of neural tube defects (spina bifida).

A recent DoH recommendation is that pregnant women take Vitamin D supplements, this may be especially important if your religion requires you to cover a significant amount of your body (Vitamin D is absorbed into our skin by exposure to sunlight).

Be aware of toxoplasmosis - a bacterial infection that can be picked up in cat and dog faeces - not good news for a growing baby. Either get someone else to clear up after animals, or just be extra careful of hygiene - this also applies to gardening as the bacteria lives in soil. So if you garden, consider wearing gloves and again wash hands, nails very carefully.

Food advice in early pregnancy is to be extra careful with hygiene; food poisoning is bad news for your baby. Don't eat any unpasteurised foods - most food is pasteurised, but some speciality milks, cheeses/diary are not. Avoid moulded or veined cheeses and pate/salami. Eggs should be well cooked not runny. Fruit and vegetables should be washed prior to eating. It is suggested that you don't eat swordfish or marlin and limit the consumption of "oily" fish to twice weekly. Sea food should be cooked not raw. Liver is not recommended for pregnant women.

Whilst pregnant the current recommendation is not to drink alcohol at all, and it is better to limit the amount of caffeine you take (tea, coffee, cola and fizzy

drinks), and obviously it would be wise to stop smoking and avoid any “recreational” drugs prior to getting pregnant.

We are still evaluating the evidence regarding eating peanuts in pregnancy – the best current advice is that if you have nut allergies in the family it may well be best to avoid eating nuts in pregnancy; if there are no nut allergies then use your own instinct and judgement as to whether you feel safe to eat nuts (bearing in mind they are a good source of protein, particularly if you are vegetarian or vegan).

Having made a huge list of foods to avoid, you are encouraged to eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (aim for at least five a day), plenty of protein (at every meal if you possibly can) and plenty of iron rich foods (red meat, pulses, green vegetables).

It can sometimes take many months to conceive and this can be a stressful time. I would encourage you to consider seeing complementary therapists as they may well be able to help you. It is worth considering acupuncturists, reflexologists, nutritionalists, homoeopaths or hypnotherapists – talk to different therapists and go to the one that you feel most comfortable with. The following websites also have lots of useful information:

www.haveababy.com

www.womantomother.co.uk

<http://www.foresight-preconception.org.uk>

<http://www.zitawest.com>

<http://www.eatwell.gov.uk/agesandstages/pregnancy/whenyrpregnant/>

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