

FACTSHEET: Preconception Care

What is Preconception Care?

If you are trying to have a baby or are just thinking about it, it is not too early to start getting ready for pregnancy.

Traditionally, the care given to a mother and child begins between 8 and 12 weeks pregnant. At this point, expectant mothers would visit their prenatal caregiver and receive information about pregnancy care, lifestyle, health, and a range of other topics necessary for the healthy growth of their child.

However, in recent years a strong emphasis has been placed on the importance of pre-pregnancy care, aimed at helping women to be best prepared for pregnancy by focusing on the things they can do before, or between pregnancies to increase their health, and their baby.

A wide range of initiatives have been developed designed to help couples looking to have children ensure they start their pregnancy planning under the best possible conditions.



Preconception Supplements.

Women planning a pregnancy are advised to take a daily folic acid supplement starting from at least 3 months before conception to reduce the risk of the baby developing a neural tube defect such as spina bifida. The standard dose in Australia is 500mcg/ day. However, some preconception and pregnancy supplements will have a higher dose. Women who are at a higher risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect may be advised by their doctor to take 5mg of folic acid per day.

It's recommended that women continue taking folic acid supplements until after the first trimester of pregnancy.

Iodine supplements are also advised to be taken with a minimum dose of 150mcg/ day. Iodine helps to produce thyroid hormones in the baby promoting brain growth and development.

Women with known deficiencies may also require iron or vitamin D supplementation.

Preconception Testing.

Some infections such as Rubella (German Measles) and Varicella (Chicken Pox) can cause significant complications if they are caught for the first-time during pregnancy. It's recommended that you have your immunity checked with before becoming pregnant and be vaccinated if you have low or no immunity.

Pregnancy must be avoided for at least 28 days after vaccination, so tests are ideally performed in advance of trying to conceive. Your doctor may also recommend other tests including checking your blood group and to check general health.

Diet & Exercise.

A healthy, well balanced diet and regular exercise are important in keeping your body in good condition when planning a pregnancy. A BMI in the normal range 20-25 can help improve conception rates and limit pregnancy complications.

Once pregnant, avoid contact sports and overheating (including saunas & spas) to reduce the risk of miscarriage.

The NSW Health Authority website has a factsheet called "Food Safety During Pregnancy" which provides information on diet, food preparation, and storage to avoid food poisoning which can be especially harmful once pregnant.

There are also certain foods that are recommended you avoid once pregnant, these include soft cheese and undercooked meat etc. Caffeine and alcohol intake should be reduced in the period leading up to conception, and alcohol removed altogether once pregnant.



Avoiding Infections.

Some infections such as Rubella, Varicella, Listeria, Toxoplasmosis, Cytomegalovirus, Parvovirus and Zika Virus can cause potential harm to the baby if contracted during pregnancy. Avoid travelling to an area known to have Zika Virus if you are planning a pregnancy.

Checking Rubella and Varicella immunity and vaccinating before pregnancy is protective. Practising good food hygiene, handwashing, and avoiding people or animals known to be sick can reduce the risk of infection.

Pregnant women should avoid handling cat litter trays.

Genetic Screening.

We can now screen for genetic conditions that could cause a problem if both parents are carriers. The aim of this testing is to give couples the opportunity to find out if they carry a genetic condition and how likely they are to pass this condition to a child prior to falling pregnant so that they can make the best decision for them.

The most common gene carrier tests available look for Cystic Fibrosis, Spinal Muscular Atrophy and Fragile X Syndrome, but there are genetic screening panels that test for hundreds of carrier genes available. However, these tests are not funded by Medicare.



Medications.

If you're taking regular prescribed medications before pregnancy, it's a good idea to check that these are safe to use once pregnant.

Prescribed and over the counter medications can be checked with your doctor or with Mothersafe, a free telephone service. Tel: 9382 6539 <http://www.mothersafe.org.au/>

When should I have investigate if I am not falling pregnant?

If a woman is under the age of 35 and has been trying to conceive for more than 12 months without success, then it is reasonable to start investigating any underlying reason why.

Women over the age of 35 will have fewer eggs that also may also be of a lower quality so, earlier investigation is recommended if she has not conceived within 6 months of trying.

Regardless of age seeking early advice about fertility is recommended if the woman experiences irregular periods, Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, a history of pelvic infections, or another medical reason why fertility may be affected.

Similarly, if a man has had a history of testicular injury or infection, or has had undescended testicles, he should seek early advice.

It is usually beneficial to see both partners for consultation and investigation if a couple is having difficulty with fertility or conception.

Smoking, Alcohol & Illicit Drug Use.

Smoking and taking illicit drugs can cause damage to the baby, restrict growth, and should be avoided if planning a pregnancy. Nicotine replacement is much safer than smoking. For women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Tip for Conceiving.

90% of couples where the female is aged under 35 and who are trying to conceive will be successful within 12 months. For the best chances of becoming pregnant, it's recommended to have regular unprotected vaginal intercourse every 2-3 days throughout a woman's menstrual cycle, particularly during the fertile window.

The fertile window is the 5 days leading up to ovulation and the day of ovulation. Ovulation kits can be used, but these are sometimes inaccurate and expensive. Reducing stress levels improves chances of conception.

More information.

If you have follow-up questions or a specific query that the information on this page did not cover, we encourage you to contact us. We can be reached via phone on 02 9411 3411 or via email at info@clinic66.com.au. Or, you can book an appointment at our Chatswood clinic between 8 am and 6 pm, Monday to Saturday.