

WOMEN, THE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW AND DO BEFORE YOU BECOME PREGNANT

RAKSHA JOSHI MD

National health statistics show that in the United States of America, half of all pregnancies every year are not planned pregnancies, and half of all these unplanned pregnancies end in voluntary termination of the pregnancy with all its possible ill effects, physical and psychological for the woman. In order to prevent all these ill effects and also to improve the outcomes of a pregnancy for both mother and baby, it is imperative that each woman be in the best possible health before she becomes pregnant. A woman who has the knowledge of when she wishes to become pregnant will plan to attain the best possible health before starting a pregnancy and will take adequate measures not to become pregnant accidentally.

Preconception health care is thus of utmost importance to all women who have the possibility of becoming pregnant, whether they are planning to become pregnant or not. Preconception care helps a woman to maintain her health at the best all the time, so that even if she becomes pregnant without really planning the pregnancy, she will still be in the best of health to manage that pregnancy.

The common theme of 'before pregnancy' care (preconception care), is to address health factors that would affect the mother and possibly the fetus adversely if the woman were to become pregnant. Also, preconception care helps the woman to use effective birth control methods so that an accidental pregnancy can be avoided.

1. **Medical conditions** – e.g. if a woman has diabetes and the blood sugars are not well controlled, she is at higher risk for spontaneous miscarriage, defects of the heart and other birth defects for the fetus. It is therefore imperative for her to plan her pregnancy and get excellent control of her diabetes before becoming pregnant. Her physician will help her to achieve all these goals. If a woman has high blood pressure and she is on certain type of medications, the fetus may suffer malformations, so it is important for the woman to plan her pregnancy and if needed, change her medications to those that do not cause fetal malformations.
2. **High risk lifestyle factors** – Lifestyle factors such as smoking, alcohol use, illicit drugs use are all factors that would adversely affect a pregnancy. Smoking has been related to increased chances of spontaneous miscarriage, alcohol use has been associated with the well recognized fetal alcohol syndrome with multiple fetal malformations. Mental retardation caused by alcohol use during early pregnancy is permanent and there is no known treatment for it and it is 100% avoidable if the pregnancy is planned and the woman stops alcohol use before she becomes pregnant.
3. **Family history and genetic risk** – Certain conditions and diseases are genetically transmitted. If parents know their status e.g. if the mother and father are both 'carriers' of the Cystic Fibrosis gene or the Sickle Cell Disease gene, then the chances that a fetus will have the full blown disease are 1 in 4 and this can be devastating to the family.
4. **Immunization history** – If the woman has not received her vaccinations such as MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella), and if she contracts Rubella (German Measles) then it is possible that the fetus will suffer ill-effects of the infection such as cataracts and other defects. Hepatitis B can be transmitted to the fetus across the placenta too, and can affect the fetus, as can Chicken pox and other infections. It is important therefore to obtain immunization that is available and indicated. The influenza vaccine is

- recommended for all pregnant women even if they are in the first trimester and protects against influenza.
5. **Medications and Radiation exposure** – All medications should be reviewed by the woman's physician when she decides that she is going to commence trying to become pregnant. Pregnancy should be excluded before all diagnostic and therapeutic procedures that involve radiation exposure especially to the pelvis.
 6. **Occupational and environmental exposures** – If a woman works in an environment where she could be exposed to potentially damaging substances for example nitrous oxide gas for physicians who are anesthesiologists, then the woman must stop such exposures.
 7. **Social issues** – Social issues such as intimate partner violence or financial assistance should also be addressed and a solution sought before commencing a pregnancy.
 8. **Mental health issues** – Depression during pregnancy can affect a pregnancy negatively as can the medications that are being taken for its treatment. If a woman is planning a pregnancy she should consult her physician to review her medications and risks and benefits associated with them, so that the potential negative effects on the fetus can be avoided. The risks and benefits of continuing on medication or change in medication should also be reviewed.
 9. **Nutrition** – A woman who is anemic or otherwise malnourished is likely to have a pregnancy complicated by IUGR (Intra Uterine Growth Restriction), and other complications and is more likely to have complications in labor such as excessive bleeding during delivery. Folic acid deficiency before commencing a pregnancy has been associated with open neural tube defects (such as spina bifida)
 10. **Sexually Transmitted Infections** - (STIs) such as Syphilis, Hepatitis C and B, Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea, HIV, Herpes can all affect the fetus early in pregnancy and some of these diseases can be transmitted to the fetus across the placenta during pregnancy therefore it is imperative that these should be tested for and treated before commencing a pregnancy.
 11. **Past pregnancies** – Knowing the outcomes of past pregnancies is important because any medical, genetic or other condition which may have had an adverse effect on a prior pregnancy may still exist. If possible all factors that can adversely affect a subsequent pregnancy should be removed before a new pregnancy begins. Knowing the outcome or the details of any complications in a prior pregnancy also helps to plan the appropriate care for all subsequent pregnancies.

So you can see how important it is to plan a pregnancy and avoid accidental pregnancy. Do not hesitate to ask your physician any questions that you may have before commencing a pregnancy and use contraception to avoid accidental pregnancy.

RAKSHA JOSHI, MD
MEDICAL DIRECTOR AND CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER
MONMOUTH FAMILY HEALTH CENTER
LONG BRANCH, NJ
TEL: 732-923-7145