

5 Tips to Prevent Birth Defects

By **InovaNewsroom** (<https://www.inovanewsroom.org/author/shanarieger/>) | March 3, 2020

Healthy behaviors before and during pregnancy can help prevent birth defects

Stephanie J. Williams, MD, is a board-certified OB/GYN with Inova Obstetrics and Gynecology in Shirlington. She delivers babies at Inova AlexandriaHospital.



Today, March 3, marks World Birth Defects Day. If you plan to expand your family any time soon, now is the right time to learn about ways to increase your chances for a healthy baby and lower the risks for birth defects.

Some birth defects are out of our control. However, some are preventable — but only if parents know which actions to take. Education is crucial. Making an appointment with your healthcare provider even before conceiving is one of the first steps you can take to decrease the risk of having a baby with certain birth defects.

Here's what you'll want to be sure to talk about with your doctor and partner. Notice that most discussions begin long before hearing those two wonderful words: ***You're pregnant!***



1. Schedule a visit with your primary healthcare provider and OB/GYN provider before getting pregnant. This gives you ample time to discuss a safe, healthy plan of action concerning any prescriptions you take, which may involve a dosage adjustment, switching to a different medication or weaning you off a prescription that could harm your developing baby. It's also a good opportunity to get caught up on vaccines that can protect you and your baby against serious diseases. In particular, the CDC recommends a flu shot, deemed safe before or during pregnancy, and a whooping cough vaccine, which is recommended only during the last three months of pregnancy.

2. Know your family medical history. This helps a physician pinpoint your risk factors for having a baby with certain birth defects and also suggests what to watch for in ultrasounds. Detecting and treating birth defects in utero is a very new science, but advancements are happening every day. For example, a congenital heart defect can now be identified in utero, which puts medical intervention into motion sooner. Being prepared can set the stage for a healthier outcome.

3. Begin taking a daily prenatal vitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid three months before pregnancy. If that's not possible, begin immediately (<https://www.inovanewsroom.org/expert-commentary/2018/01/a-prenatal-vitamin-a-day-before-pregnancy-keeps-birth-defects-away/>) upon learning the good news. Folic acid, a B vitamin, can help prevent certain major birth defects, including spina bifida and anencephaly, by up to 70 percent. These birth defects develop very early during pregnancy, often before a woman knows she's pregnant. That explains why doctors recommend taking a daily prenatal vitamin before pregnancy. In addition to a supplement, be sure to eat foods rich in natural folic acid, called folate, which is present in leafy green vegetables, citrus fruits and beans. The CDC notes, "it is very difficult for most women to get the daily recommended amount of folate through food alone."

4. Try to reach a healthy weight before getting pregnant. Obesity is linked to an increased risk of pregnancy complications for both mother and developing baby. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

([https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Reducing-Risks-of-Birth-Defects?](https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Reducing-Risks-of-Birth-Defects?IsMobileSet=false#pregnancy)

IsMobileSet=false#pregnancy) (ACOG), women who are obese when becoming pregnant also have an increased risk of having babies with certain birth defects, including birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord, heart defects and cleft palate. If planning a pregnancy, focus on a healthy lifestyle that's based on a nutritious, balanced diet and regular physical activity to promote healthy weight loss.

5. Steer clear of substances that are harmful to your developing baby. That means no alcohol, no recreational drugs and no tobacco. Specific to alcohol and marijuana, there is no known safe amount for a developing baby, which is why abstinence is recommended. As for tobacco, it's not good for mother or baby. If you need help kicking any behavior that could harm your baby, talk to your doctor about getting help. Counseling, treatment and other support services are available; you only need to ask.

Specialized Care for At-Risk Pregnancies

The Antenatal Testing Center at Inova Women's Hospital (<https://www.inova.org/our-services/inova-womens-services/childbirth-services/antenatal-testing-iwh>) provides specialized care for pregnancies that are at risk for maternal, fetal or obstetric complications.

Call 703-776-6654 for more information.
