



Preparing for a pregnancy

Patient information leaflet

Tayside Sexual and Reproductive Health Service

Being well informed and preparing for pregnancy can improve your chances of getting pregnant and having a healthy pregnancy.

How long should it take to conceive?

Most healthy, fertile couples get pregnant within 1 year of trying. Each month a couple tries, there is about a 20% chance of getting pregnant. Having unprotected sex about 3 times a week before and at the time of ovulation will maximise the chance of conception.

If you have been trying for over a year without success (or 6 months if you are over 36 years of age) you can speak to your GP about fertility investigations and referral to a fertility doctor.

Nutrition and exercise

Eating a well balanced diet and having a healthy weight can both help you to get pregnant and have a healthy pregnancy. Being overweight (BMI over 25) or obese (BMI over 30) can increase the risk of some pregnancy related problems.

A healthy diet and regular, moderate exercise are encouraged during pregnancy for the health of you and your baby. Avoid intense exercise and getting overheated.

Folic Acid

A folic acid supplement is recommended for everyone who is planning a pregnancy (or might get pregnant) and for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

This helps reduce the risk of your baby developing a neural tube defect such as spina bifida.

For most people, a folic acid 400 microgram (0.4mg) tablet once a day is enough and these are available from pharmacies and supermarkets.

Some people may be recommended to take a higher dose of folic acid (5mg), which can be prescribed by your GP.

You may need to take a 5mg supplement of folic acid if:

- You or the baby's other parent have a neural tube defect or there is a history of this in your family
- You have previously had a baby affected by a neural tube defect
- You have diabetes or coeliac disease
- You take medication for epilepsy
- You take certain medication for HIV
- You are obese (BMI of 30 or more)
- You have sickle cell anaemia or thalassaemia

Don't worry if you are unexpectedly pregnant and were not taking folic acid at the time. Start taking folic acid as soon as you know you are pregnant and continue up to 12 weeks of your pregnancy.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is needed for growth. Vitamin D supplements are recommended for everyone who is pregnant.

If you are at risk of having a low vitamin D level, it may be worth building up your levels before pregnancy.

Those who may be at risk of low vitamin D include:

- If you have little exposure to sunlight. For example you only go out covered up or are housebound
- If you are of South Asian, African, Caribbean or Middle Eastern family origin
- If your diet is low in vitamin D. For example you eat no oily fish, eggs, meat or vitamin D fortified margarine or breakfast cereal.
- If you are overweight with a BMI which is more than 30.

Stopping smoking

Smoking can lead to a variety of health problems during pregnancy including:

- Miscarriage
- Premature birth
- Low birth weight

- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Breathing problems in first 6 months of life

Breathing in smoke from other people's cigarettes can also be harmful for your baby, so ask other people not to smoke around you during your pregnancy.

Help to quit smoking is available through your midwife, GP practice and online (NHS Smokefree).

Alcohol

It is not recommended to drink alcohol during the first three months and ideally throughout your pregnancy as this can be passed to your baby, the more alcohol you drink the greater the risk to your baby.

Drugs

Recreational drugs should be avoided during pregnancy to reduce harm to your baby.

If you are taking prescribed medications and are planning a pregnancy or discover that you are pregnant, please check with your pharmacist or GP to ensure these are safe during pregnancy in case you need to change to an alternative.

Don't stop your medicines without medical advice.

Caffeine

Reducing caffeine intake to 2 cups of coffee or 4 cups of tea a day is recommended during pregnancy. Consider swapping to decaffeinated drinks if you drink more than this.

Vaccination and infection

Some infections before or during pregnancy can be harmful to your baby.

Rubella (German measles) during pregnancy can be harmful. Many people will have been vaccinated against rubella, but you can check with your GP practice to find out whether you have been vaccinated and to see if you have immunity to rubella.

You should avoid getting pregnant within 28 days of rubella vaccination.

Covid-19

There is some evidence that pregnant women are at a higher risk of being unwell if they catch covid-19. If you are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant, then vaccination is recommended.

Listeria is a common bacterial infection which can be passed through contaminated food. It can be found in unpasteurised milk and soft cheeses, raw and cold processed meats, pre-cut fruit and salads, pate, raw and smoked seafood.

During pregnancy, it is best to avoid these foods, wash raw vegetables, thoroughly cook all foods of animal origin and clean utensils after preparing uncooked food.

Toxoplasmosis

It is recommended that you wear gloves or wash your hands thoroughly after handling cat litter to avoid toxoplasmosis.

Long term medical conditions

If you have a long term condition such as diabetes, epilepsy, thyroid problems, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or mental health issues you should discuss your medication, management of your condition and plans for your pregnancy and delivery with your doctor and midwife. Ideally this should be done before getting pregnant in case changes to your medication are recommended.

If you have a history of severe mental health illness, it is best for you to be under the care of a specialist throughout your pregnancy.

Genetic conditions

You will be offered screening during your pregnancy to test for some genetic disorders.

If you have a family history or have a child with a genetic disorder, or you or your partner are known to be a carrier then you can discuss this with your GP, ideally before you get pregnant.

Cervical screening

Cervical smears cannot be taken during and for the first 3 months after a pregnancy. If you are due a smear, please arrange this before trying for a pregnancy.

Work environment

Some working environments and exposure to substances in the workplace could potentially be harmful during pregnancy, particularly if you work with raw meat, animals, chemicals, fumes or radiation. Please take advice from your manager to see if any changes need to be made during your pregnancy.

Further information can be found on:

<http://patient.info/pregnancy/planning-to-become-pregnant>

<https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/planning-pregnancy/planning-for-pregnancy-tool>

We want to hear about your care experience
Share your story – help make our service better



<https://www.careopinion.org.uk/tellyourstory?nacs=T101H-sex-health>

You can find more information about this here:

https://www.nhstayside.scot.nhs.uk/GoingToHospital/GiveUsFeedback/PROD_320144/index.htm

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