



Women's Health

## 10 Steps for Pre-pregnancy Planning

Whether you're thinking about having a baby or there's a chance you could get pregnant, it's best to be prepared. "Being pregnant is like a marathon, so you want you and your baby to have the best chance and environment right from the start," explained Bayhealth Family Medicine Doctor Kandis Samuels, MD, MPH, who also provides gynecological and pregnancy care for women.

To give yourself the greatest chance of winning the marathon, Dr. Samuels says to plan early—before you get pregnant. With that in mind, she shared 10 steps for successful pre-pregnancy planning.

**Step One: Start taking 400 mcg of folic acid daily at least four weeks before you plan to get pregnant.** Folic acid plays a crucial role in the development of the neural tube, which becomes the baby's brain, spinal cord, spine, and skull. So taking it will help prevent neural tube defects such as spina bifida. Since the neural tube forms about four weeks after conception when many women don't even know they're pregnant, all women of child-bearing age should be getting an adequate amount of folic acid. Most of our foods are fortified with folic acid, but taking it in supplement form guarantees you and your baby will have the right amount.

**Step Two: Stop birth control.** If you take birth control pills or use patches or vaginal rings, you need to stop them at least one month before you want to get pregnant. It takes one to three months for the average woman to return to normal ovulation after stopping these birth control methods. And, if you're on an injectable form of birth control, it can take up to 10 months to return to normal ovulation.

**Step Three: Exercise.** Aim for 150 minutes of moderate-to-high intensity aerobic exercise weekly and at least two days per week of muscle-strengthening activity, such as resistance exercises. Regular exercise provides many benefits, including achieving a healthy weight—which takes us to the next step of pre-pregnancy planning.

**Step Four: Achieve a healthy weight.** This number is determined by your height and what's referred to as body mass index or BMI. You can find BMI calculators online. If you're still not sure what your ideal weight is, ask your healthcare provider. To complete this pre-pregnancy planning step, you may need to adjust your diet. Most popular diet plans are okay—the important thing is to find something you can stick with, as it should be a lifestyle change, not a temporary fix. And don't forget to follow the exercise guidelines above.

**Step Five: Stop using substances that are harmful to you and your baby's health.** This includes alcohol, cigarettes and other tobacco products, vaporizers, and drugs including marijuana.

**Step Six: Check for environmental exposures and limit them.** This includes ones you're exposed to at home and at work. It's important you know what you're being exposed to so you can protect yourself and your baby. For example, if you're using heavy duty bleach or other toxic chemicals such as those associated with manufacturing and agriculture and you can't avoid them, you need to wear gloves and change them frequently and also make sure there's proper ventilation.

**Step Seven: Know your family history.** When it comes to pregnancy, knowing about history of birth defects is just one piece of the puzzle. You should also know about any family history of diabetes, hypertension, and anxiety or other mental health concerns. This information will help your doctor determine your own risk for conditions such as gestational diabetes, preeclampsia (pregnancy-related high blood pressure) and postpartum depression. Then you can work together to help prevent these from happening during or after your pregnancy.

**Step Eight: Be aware of your emotional well-being.** Pregnancy is emotionally intense because of the fluctuation of hormones, etc. So you need to do what you can to start off on firm footing. Be honest with yourself and your doctor or other healthcare provider—talk openly about any feelings you have and ask for their help if you need it.

**Step Nine: If you don't already have one, find a doctor or other healthcare provider.** They can help you achieve these pre-pregnancy planning steps and goals. And be sure to follow any additional advice they give based on your own unique needs.

**Step Ten: Have a preconception counseling visit.** At this visit, your doctor or provider will review any medications you're taking and lifestyle changes you need to make. He or she will also go over your family history and address any of the other pre-pregnancy planning recommendations described above.

Following these steps will make pre-pregnancy planning a success and get you and your baby safely across the marathon finish line. If you don't have a doctor and would like to make an appointment with Dr. Samuels in her office in Dover, call Bayhealth Family Medicine, Dover at 302-725-3200.

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