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## Prenatal Care

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One of the key elements in the outcome of a pregnancy is prenatal care. "Prenatal" means "before birth," but optimal pregnancy care is not only prenatal, but in fact "pre-pregnancy." A mother's behavior during pregnancy, as well as her general health even before pregnancy, influences her child's health. Pregnancy may seem far removed from life right now, but things can change fast; a healthy lifestyle doesn't happen overnight. Pregnant women of all ages should consider the following.

### See Your Doctor

Proper medical care during pregnancy is vital not only to a woman's health, but also to the health of the fetus. Historically, prenatal care has been one of the most significant factors in saving mothers' lives and decreasing fetal mortality.<sup>1</sup> Today prenatal care remains just as important. At the first reasonable likelihood of pregnancy, a woman should seek prenatal care.<sup>2</sup> A variety of over-the-counter tests can indicate pregnancy, while more accurate tests administered by a doctor can detect pregnancy as early as eight to nine days after fertilization.<sup>3</sup> During the first visit, the health of the woman and fetus will be evaluated. Her blood pressure, height, and weight will be measured, and blood and urine samples will be taken for laboratory testing. From this testing important information is gathered concerning susceptibility to infection, maternal blood type, and the presence of certain diseases. The health care provider will perform a pelvic examination to measure the size of the woman's womb.<sup>4</sup> The age of the fetus in "weeks of gestation completed" will be estimated from the woman's last menstrual period. Knowing the fetus's age is necessary to determine the delivery date and provide ideal prenatal care.<sup>5</sup>



The health care provider will also advise the woman on diet, relaxation and sleep, exercise, and the dangers of smoking, drinking, and using drugs.<sup>6</sup> Nutritional counseling is an important part of prenatal care as eating well during pregnancy is essential to the health of the growing fetus.<sup>7</sup> The first visit ends with an individualized plan for continued care. This may range from routine visits to specialized or intensive care if necessary.<sup>8</sup> It is best for both woman and fetus when, even before pregnancy, a woman takes care of her body by eating well, exercising, and avoiding harmful substances. Initiating prenatal care as early as possible promotes maternal and fetal health. The health of the fetus can only be maximized by maximizing the health of the mother. The final goal of this care is to enable a mother to safely deliver a healthy baby.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Cunningham et al., 1997, 227.
- 2 Cunningham et al., 1997, 230.
- 3 Cunningham et al., 1997, 26.
- 4 DeCherney and Pernoll, 1994, 192-193.
- 5 Cunningham et al., 1997, 229.
- 6 Cunningham et al., 1997, 231.
- 7 Kolasa and Weismiller, 1997, 205.
- 8 Cunningham et al., 1997, 230.
- 9 DeCherney and Pernoll, 1994, 191.

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