

What You Need to Know About Prenatal Care



Prenatal care is the care you get while you are pregnant. This care can be provided by a doctor, midwife or other health care professional. All women need prenatal care. Women who see a health care provider regularly during pregnancy have healthier babies, are less likely to deliver prematurely, and are less likely to have other serious problems related to pregnancy. A woman with a chronic medical condition or a “high-risk” pregnancy may have to see her health care provider more often. Make sure you go to all your prenatal care appointments, even if you’re feeling fine. The goal of prenatal care is to monitor the progress of a pregnancy and to identify potential problems before they become serious for either mom or baby.

A typical prenatal care schedule for a low-risk woman with a normally progressing pregnancy is:

- Weeks 4 to 28: 1 visit per month (every 4 weeks)
- Weeks 28 to 36: 2 visits per month (every 2 to 3 weeks)
- Weeks 36 to birth: 1 visit per week

During prenatal visits, the health care provider:

- Teaches the woman about pregnancy
- Monitors any medical conditions she may have (such as high blood pressure)
- Tests for problems with the baby
- Tests for health problems in the woman (such as gestational diabetes)
- Refers the woman to services such as support groups, the WIC program or childbirth education classes

What you can do:

As soon as you think you are pregnant, call your health care provider to find out when you should come in for your first prenatal care appointment.

During your pregnancy, make sure you attend all of your prenatal care appointments, even if you’re feeling fine.

Sometimes getting to an appointment may be difficult or it may seem like a waste of time. For the sake of your baby, though, make getting prenatal care a priority.

Ideally, it's best to see your provider before you become pregnant. This is called a preconception visit. This visit can address concerns and issues before you get pregnant.

What Happens at a Prenatal Care Visit?

During your first prenatal care visit, your provider will ask you a lot of questions and do some tests. Most of your other visits will be much shorter.

At the first visit your health care provider will:

- Ask you about your health, your partner's health and the health of your close family members. Don't worry if you don't know all the answers.
- Identify medical problems.
- Discuss with you any medications you are taking.
- Do a physical exam and a pelvic (internal) exam.
- Weigh you.
- Check your blood pressure.
- Check a urine sample for infection.
- Do some blood tests to check for anemia and see if you have had certain infections. You will be asked if you want a test for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- Do a pap smear to check for cervical cancer and other tests for vaginal infections
- Figure out your due date: an estimate of the day your baby will be born. Most babies are born within two weeks (before or after) their due date.
- Make sure you're taking a prenatal vitamin with folic acid.

During later prenatal visits your provider will:

- Weigh you.
- Check your blood pressure.
- Measure your belly to see how the baby is growing (middle and late pregnancy).
- Check your hands, feet and face for swelling.
- Listen for the baby's heartbeat (after the 12th week of pregnancy).
- Feel your abdomen to assess the baby's position (later in pregnancy).
- Do any tests that are needed, such as blood tests or ultrasound.
- Ask you if you have any questions or concerns. It's a good idea to write down your questions and bring a list with you so you don't forget.

Remember, the things you tell your health care provider are confidential. That means that he or she can't tell anyone else what you say without your permission. So don't be afraid to talk about issues that might be uncomfortable or embarrassing. It's OK to tell your provider if you smoke, drink alcohol or take any drugs, or if your partner hurts or scares you. Your provider needs to know all about you and your lifestyle so that he or she can give you and your baby the best care.

No one knows exactly why women who get early and regular prenatal care have healthier pregnancies and healthier babies. But we do know it works. So go. Do it for yourself and your baby.

Remember: In addition to prenatal care, be sure to have a dental checkup early in pregnancy to help your mouth remain healthy. You may even want to see your dentist more often than usual.

