

Preconception Care

If you're trying for a baby there are things you can do to help make sure you have a safe and comfortable pregnancy and that your child is healthy.

Last reviewed
17 June 2026

Think about the lifestyle factors that might affect your ability to get pregnant and have a healthy pregnancy. This applies to men too. You are more likely to get pregnant if you are both in good health.

Folic Acid

Folic acid is very important for the development of a healthy baby, as it can reduce the risk of neural tube defects (NTDs), such as spina bifida. Most women need to take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid daily for 12 weeks before becoming pregnant and up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. You can get these tablets from a supermarket or pharmacist. If you have previously had a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect, or if you have coeliac disease, sickle cell disease, diabetes, obesity (BMI over 30kg/m²) or take anti-epileptic medicines, ask your GP or midwife for more advice as you will need to take a higher dose of folic acid (5mg) that requires a prescription.

If you get pregnant unexpectedly and weren't taking folic acid supplements, start taking them as soon as you find out, up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. Once you are pregnant, you should also take 10 mg of vitamin D daily and healthy start vitamins throughout the pregnancy.

Link to Information Leaflet: [Folic acid - one of life's essentials | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](https://www.hscni.net/health-topics/childbirth-and-baby/childbirth-and-baby-essentials/folic-acid)

Stopping contraception prior to trying for a baby

A lot of women will come to get implants and coils removed in order to plan a pregnancy. You should consider commencing folic acid prior to getting your contraceptive device removed.

There are no long term effects on fertility with contraceptive pills, coils or implants and most women return to a regular menstrual cycle in 4-6 weeks.

Smoking

If you or your partner smoke, get advice about stopping. Smoking significantly lowers your chances of getting pregnant, increases your chance of miscarriage and, if you continue to smoke during pregnancy, may harm your baby. Protecting your baby from cigarette smoke is one of the best things you can do to give your child the best start in life.

You are up to 4 times more likely to stop smoking successfully with support. Visit www.stopsmokingni.info for further information on the specialist stop smoking services that are easily available across Northern Ireland. These free stop smoking services provide nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and are run by specially trained staff who can advise you on the best way to manage your cravings and become smoke free. Services are offered in many GP practices, community pharmacies, Trust premises and community and voluntary organisations.

Alcohol

If you are planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all. Drinking even moderate amounts of alcohol can harm your chances of conceiving. This applies to both men and women, so if you are having trouble conceiving, you should cut out alcohol completely and see if this helps. Drinking alcohol in pregnancy can lead to long term harm to your baby, the more you drink the greater the risk to your baby's physical and mental development. For men, your fertility is unlikely to be affected if your alcohol intake is within the recommended limit of 14 units of alcohol per week. Drinking too much alcohol can affect semen quality.

For help to cut down, talk to your healthcare professional or visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info

Illegal drugs

Using recreational drugs like cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin and anabolic steroids can interfere with your fertility and damage a developing baby. Talk to your healthcare professional for help and advice.

Medicines, including herbal medicines

If you or your partner take any medication, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about whether it will affect your pregnancy. Your doctor will advise you whether you can safely continue to take your medication or whether it should be changed to an alternative or stopped. Never stop taking your medication without speaking to your doctor.

Eat a healthy, balanced diet and take regular physical activity

You should also try to follow a healthy, balanced diet by trying to eat

- plenty of fruit and vegetables (this can include fresh, frozen, tinned, dried produce, or a glass of juice) – aim for at least five portions a day
- plenty of starchy foods such as bread, pasta, rice and potatoes (choose wholegrain options where you can)
- protein-rich food such as lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs and pulses (beans and lentils)
- dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, which contain calcium

You should try to avoid:

- processed foods and foods that are high in fats and sugar

- sugary snacks and drinks

It is important to take regular, moderate exercise so that your body is in good shape for pregnancy and you have plenty of energy and stamina for labour and caring for a baby.

Be a healthy weight

The range of healthy weight is defined by the body mass index (BMI). A healthy weight is a BMI of between 20 and 25.

It can take longer to get pregnant if you are underweight (your BMI is under 19) or you have obesity (your BMI is 30 or above). If you are underweight or overweight and/or you have irregular or no periods, reaching a healthy weight will help your ovaries to start working again. Men who have a BMI of 30 or above are likely to have reduced fertility.

If you need help to get to a healthy weight, visit www.choosetolivebetter.com or speak to your doctor or pharmacist.

Sexual Health

Some sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can be passed on to your baby during pregnancy, so make sure you have both been treated for any infections before planning to conceive. If you are at risk of any STIs or have any concerns, seek medical advice or visit www.sexualhealthni.info

Vaccinations and infections

Make sure you are up to date with vaccines such as rubella (German Measles). Some infections such as rubella can harm your baby if you catch them during pregnancy. If you are not sure, check with your GP whether you have had two doses of the MMR vaccination. Avoid getting pregnant for a month after having your MMR vaccination.

Women with diabetes, epilepsy, mental health problems or other ongoing health problems

If you have a health condition, for example mental health problems, diabetes or a family history of any inherited diseases, talk to your GP or specialist about getting pregnant. It is important that your condition is best controlled before you try to get pregnant.

If you're taking a medication for a condition, don't stop taking it without consulting your doctor.

Relationships

Relationship abuse happens when someone you're in a relationship with hurts or exploits you. You can be in an abusive relationship without being aware of it when you experience physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse.

If you are in an abusive relationship, seek help by contacting Women's Aid 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence at www.womensaidni.org or call 0808 802 1414

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