



**B**ecoming parents is one of the most important decisions you and your spouse may consider in your marriage. A few changes in your lifestyle can make a critical difference to your baby's health. Scientific studies show that using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs while pregnant - even during the early stages of pregnancy - increases your baby's risk for serious birth defects.

### What You Do Today Will Last a Lifetime

**Y**our baby's organs start to develop in the first eight weeks of your pregnancy. The effects of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs may lead to serious birth defects, developmental problems, illness, and even death. You can increase the likelihood of having a healthy baby by attending regular pre-pregnancy and prenatal visits to the doctor; eating a healthy diet and exercising; taking folic acid daily; and not using drugs, alcohol, or tobacco during pregnancy.

## Drinking and Your Pregnancy

### Alcohol: A Powerful Drug

**W**hen a woman drinks alcohol during her pregnancy, she increases the risk of having a baby who will have mental and physical defects for life. Alcohol is the leading preventable cause of mental and physical birth defects, surpassing both spina bifida and Down Syndrome. As many as 123,000 babies are born annually with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) in the US. FAS is a disorder seen in some children whose mother drank during pregnancy.

Characteristics of some children with prenatal alcohol exposure include:

- Low Birth Weight
- Small Head
- Central Nervous System defects such as Mental Retardation or Learning Disabilities
- FAS is 100% Preventable!

### Nicotine: The Major Cause of Low Weight Babies

**A** pregnant woman who smokes passes nicotine and oxygen-poor blood to her growing baby. Pregnant women who smoke are more likely than nonsmokers to have low-birth weight babies (weighing less than 5.5 lbs.) and babies whose physical and intellectual growth is below normal. The risks of smoking to the fetus include: stillbirths, birth defects, low-birth weight, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Low-birth weight is the single most common cause of infant death and disease. Studies suggest that second hand smoke is a serious concern for pregnant women. Reconsider how much time you spend in smoky environments; it will make a difference for both the health of you and your baby.

### Street Drugs: Not Worth the Risk

**M**arijuana, cocaine, heroin, and other narcotic drugs are dangerous for anyone, but when a pregnant woman uses drugs, she and her unborn child may face serious health problems. During pregnancy, the drugs used by the mother enter the baby's bloodstream. The most serious effects on the baby can be caused by mothers who use intravenous drugs. They may infect their baby with HIV, which may lead to AIDS. Other serious concerns are premature birth, low-birth weight, small head size, mental retardation, stunted growth, behavioral problems, and poor motor skills. Addiction is a medical disease, and treatment can help. Talk to your healthcare provider if you need help.

### Nutrition

**E**at a variety of foods. Your body needs more than 40 different nutrients for good health. No single food can supply these nutrients in the amounts you need. One way to assure that you eat a balanced diet is to choose food each day from each of the five major food groups:

- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Breads, cereals, rice, pasta
- Milk, yogurt, cheese
- Meat, fish, eggs, poultry, nuts, dry beans, and peas

Eat plenty of vegetables, fruit, and whole grain products. Increase your fiber intake by eating more foods that contain fiber naturally like whole grain breads and cereals, dry beans and peas, vegetables, and fruits.

Use sugar in moderation. Sugar includes syrup, sucrose, brown sugar, raw sugar, glucose, fructose, maltose, lactose, honey, molasses, corn syrup, and fruit juice concentrate. Read food labels - a food high in sugar is listed first or second on the ingredient list.

### Folic Acid

**F**olic acid is a B vitamin that women should take daily before and after becoming pregnant. Folic acid is important because it helps protect your unborn baby against birth defects of the spine and brain. Folic acid is found in leafy vegetables, beans, asparagus, citrus fruits and juices, whole grain foods, and liver. The only way to ensure that you get enough folic acid is to take a supplement in addition to eating a health well balanced diet.

### Exercise

**E**xercise is important. Regular physical exercise activity provides many benefits to a woman's health throughout her lifetime. Exercising benefits your heart and lungs, improves your blood circulation, increases your energy, helps you manage stress and helps you achieve or maintain a healthy weight.

Discuss with your healthcare provider a healthy plan that includes daily exercise during your pregnancy.