



Plan for Pregnancy

Mercy

Your life is our life's work.

So, you're ready to grow your family.

It's a big decision to expand your family. Of course, we don't need to tell you that; you're here, which means you're already thinking about everything you need to do for a healthy body, successful conception, safe pregnancy and birth, and a thriving baby. It all starts with you.

Mercy is here to help you lay the groundwork for good health no matter where you are in the family-planning process, with everything from fertility services to prenatal care to childbirth and pediatrics.

Consider this guide your pregnancy preparation primer. We've included special sections on boosting fertility, readying your body and mind for pregnancy and recognizing early pregnancy symptoms. We hope the information proves fruitful.

All the best,

— Your Mercy Team



Trying to conceive?

We hope the road to parenthood is easy for you, but it may not be. Fertility awareness is the first step to recognizing the best time for you to conceive and taking action. Once you know how the menstrual cycle works, you can identify your most fertile days, and time sexual intercourse to improve your odds of getting pregnant.

According to the American Pregnancy Association, a woman's menstrual cycle typically lasts 28 to 32 days, and ovulation occurs about 11-21 days before the start of her next menstrual period. However, body rhythms differ from one woman to the next, and from month to month for any individual, so it's difficult to know exactly when ovulation will occur. **There are a few simple ovulation tracking methods you can use to identify your own best time to conceive.**

Standard Days Method. Track the length of your menstrual cycle from Day 1 to the last non-period day for several months. For most women, this cycle is 26 to 32 days. If this is the case, your most fertile days are most likely days 8-19, and you should plan to have intercourse on as many of those days as possible to improve your odds of getting pregnant. This tracking method is less reliable for cycles that are shorter than 26 days or longer than 32.

Calendar Method. For more reliable tracking, plan on noting the length of your menstrual cycle for at least eight months, then single out your shortest and longest cycles. Subtract 18 from your shortest cycle to find the start of your most fertile time. For example, if your shortest cycle was 27 days, subtract 18 to get 9: Day 9 is the first day of your fertility window. Next, subtract 11 from your longest cycle. If your longest cycle is 30 days, subtract 11 to get 19, meaning the last day of your fertility window is day 19 of your cycle. In this example, days 9-19 of your cycle are your most fertile days.

Basal Body Temperature (BBT) Method. Your basal temperature is your body's lowest temperature while at rest. Use a basal thermometer (available in most pharmacies) to take your temperature each morning before you get out of bed and jot it down. During ovulation, body temperature rises 0.4 to 1 degree and remains high until the end of your menstrual cycle. Your most fertile days will be just before this temperature increase, so it's important to establish your own body's patterns. Illnesses, poor sleep, alcohol and some drugs can affect body temperature, so this method is not accurate for everyone.

Cervical Mucus Method. The consistency of cervical mucus changes throughout the menstrual cycle, becoming clearer and more slippery the closer you get to ovulation; some describe it as having the stretchy consistency of egg whites. Peak fertility will be on, or just a day or two after, you notice this consistency.

Your cycle by the numbers.

- Day **1** of your period is considered Day 1 of your menstrual cycle.
- There are **28** days in the average menstrual cycle.
- On about day **7**, the egg is getting ready for fertilization.
- Sometime during days **11-21** of the menstrual cycle is ovulation, when the egg is released from the ovary.
- The egg is available for fertilization for just **12-24** hours after ovulation.

Information provided by the American Pregnancy Association at AmericanPregnancy.org.



Go fish.



Seafood and fresh-water fish are rich in the omega-3 fatty acids DHA and EPA, essential nutrients for healthy bodies. You may be familiar with the advice for pregnant women to avoid fish that may contain mercury, and the same advice applies to those trying to conceive. Mercury, which can impair the growth of the brain and nervous system in an unborn baby, accumulates in the body and can take up to a year to go away. In general, larger fish have a higher mercury content.

Low-Mercury Fish*
Salmon (wild)
Trout
Herring
Flounder
Sardines
Whitefish
Scallops
Shrimp
Crab
High-Mercury Fish
Shark
Marlin
Swordfish
Tuna (ahi, yellowfin, bigeye, blue)
Orange roughy
King mackerel
Tilefish
Grouper
Seabass



Set the stage for pregnancy.

There's a powerful connection between nutrition, overall health and fertility.

A poor diet can make menstrual cycles and ovulation less predictable in women, or even prevent ovulation entirely. In men, an unhealthy diet can lower sperm quality. Likewise, being severely overweight or underweight can make conception difficult, so addressing nutrition during the planning is a smart move. Eating to improve fertility is a lot like eating during pregnancy—and practice makes pregnant.

Stock up on whole, unprocessed foods to get all the important vitamins and minerals for good health. That means leafy greens and vegetables of all kinds, grilled meat and fish, whole grains, and dairy in the form of small portions of cheese and unsweetened milk. Stick with foods that are simple and unprocessed. Eliminate packaged foods such as frozen dinners and snack cakes and bars. If you can't avoid convenience foods entirely, opt for ones with the fewest and healthiest ingredients possible.

Eat the right kinds of proteins. While you don't need to go vegan when trying to conceive, there are plenty of plant-based protein sources you can include in your diet without adding too much undesired saturated fat. Nuts, seeds, beans, whole grains and soy products like tofu and tempeh are all good sources of protein, as well as fiber, iron and other essential vitamins. Consider swapping out red meat in favor of a plant-based protein at least a few times a week.

Remember your nutrition basics.

Prenatal vitamin must-haves

- Folic acid - 400 mcg
- Vitamin D - 400 IU
- Calcium - 200 to 300 mg
- Vitamin C - 70 mg
- Thiamine - 3 mg
- Riboflavin - 2 mg
- Niacin - 20 mg
- B12 - 6 mcg
- Vitamin E - 10 mg
- Zinc - 15 mg
- Iron - 17 mg
- Iodine - 150 mcg



Supplementing a healthy diet.

If you're considering having a baby or actively trying, it's never too soon to start prenatal vitamins.



Hydrate.

You know the rule:

Get 8 to 10 full, 8-ounce glasses of water per day to keep your body functioning its best. Milk, tea and broth all count toward your daily total, but alcohol doesn't. Experts are split on the hydrating benefits of coffee, tea and other caffeinated beverages, so count them toward only half your liquids consumption, or not at all.

Nutritional supplements are just that: supplementary to a healthy diet, not a substitute for good nutrition. Ideally, you'll get all or most of your essential nutrients through wholesome foods. However, a multivitamin can help you meet your daily vitamin and mineral requirements if your diet occasionally falls short.

Look for a daily prenatal vitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid, which studies have linked to an increase in pregnancies. Folic acid also prevents defects in baby's neural tube during the first month of pregnancy, sometimes before a woman even realizes she's pregnant. This neural tube will develop into the brain and spinal cord.

Ask your provider to recommend or prescribe a well-rounded complete multivitamin with folic acid, plus zinc, iron, calcium, B6, C, E and other building blocks for a baby-ready body. And make sure the prospective dad-to-be is getting all his vitamins and minerals, too. Studies have shown that a diet rich in antioxidants, calcium and vitamin D can help protect testicular tissues and sperm cell DNA from damage.



Your lifestyle will be baby's lifestyle.

When you're priming your body for the important jobs of conception, pregnancy and childbirth, your environment plays an even more important role than usual. It's vital that the fuels you put into your body are as clean as they can be for your health and your baby's. Doing your own "environmental cleanup" sets the stage for a healthy pregnancy.

4 Ways to Clean Up Your Environment

Butt Out:

Tips for Quitting Smoking

- Plan how you'll quit and deal with cravings.
- Create accountability and support by making plans known.
- Find a partner to quit with you.
- Avoid places and situations that trigger the urge to smoke.
- Replace smoking with healthy habits, like exercise.

1. **Smoking is one of the most harmful things you can do to your body.**

The toxins in cigarettes increase certain risks in both men and women:

- Infertility
- Genetic abnormalities in the egg
- Miscarriage
- Ectopic pregnancy
- Low sperm count
- Sperm abnormalities

2. **Illegal drugs and alcohol are harmful to mother and baby.**

Alcohol depletes the body of hydration, B-complex vitamins, calcium, iron, omega-3s and other nutrients essential for healthy eggs, sperm and, ultimately, a healthy fetus. If you are trying to conceive, complete abstinence from dangerous drugs and alcohol is imperative.

3. Excess caffeine can contribute to elevated blood pressure. Experts suggest limiting caffeine to 200 milligrams daily—about what you'd get in two 6-ounce cups of coffee. Be mindful that there are varying levels of caffeine in energy drinks, soda, chocolate and certain over-the-counter pain and cold medications.

4. Environmental toxins include pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals and air pollution that may damage the reproductive and endocrine systems in men, women and a developing fetus. Make changes at home to reduce your exposure and your risk. Start by filtering your drinking and cooking water; use only BPA-free bottles and food containers; use air filters in the home; and limit exposure to secondhand smoke, smog and fumes.



Mental fitness counts, too.

If you're trying to conceive, it's wise to deal with stress, depression and anxiety right away.

Your care provider, or a behavioral health care provider, can work with you to identify behavioral therapies or, if necessary, anti-anxiety medications that can address your mental health needs with minimal risk. You can also take steps on your own to reduce stress.

Enjoy the journey, not just the destination. Take some of the pressure to conceive off yourself and your partner by making togetherness your top priority. Plan date nights on your most fertile days, then just focus on having a great time.

Keep doing you. Carve out time to indulge in favorite activities that are safe and healthy. Whether you love sports, music, gardening or a good book, pleasant hobbies reduce stress and boost serotonin, the “feel-good hormone.”

Learn to relax. Deep breathing, reading, meditation, warm baths, visualization and yoga are all effective ways to let go of stress. Experiment with different approaches to see what works best for you.

Stay active (but have fun doing it). A brisk stroll through a sunny park can do wonders for your mental well-being. Make time every day for moderate exercise and you may just end up with fewer pounds putting stress on your body, too.

Fitness and Fertility

Moderate exercise is one of the best things you can do to usher in a healthy pregnancy.

Walking, swimming and biking are low-stress, easy ways to get more fit. Daily exercise has been shown to reduce the time it takes to get pregnant. Besides helping you achieve or maintain a healthy weight—a factor known to improve fertility—moderate physical activity also boosts mood and energy, builds muscle tone, promotes better sleep, and improves blood pressure, blood sugar and cardiovascular health.

Most women can begin a moderate exercise routine right away, but talk to your provider before beginning a fitness regimen. To ensure you're getting the most benefit from your workouts, choose something enjoyable that you can commit to for 30 minutes on most days. Remember to drink extra water before, during and after a workout.

It's important not to overdo it on your fitness efforts. Excessive exercise—long or frequent, high-intensity workouts—can disrupt the menstrual cycle and reduce fertility. Take note of missed or irregular periods.

See your dentist.

Believe it or not, good oral hygiene can also up your chances of getting pregnant—and it's not just because fresh breath makes closeness more pleasant. Tooth decay and gum disease are associated with delays in conception in women, and with low sperm count and quality in men. Poor oral health can also raise the risk of infection, preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, and low birth weight in baby.

See your dentist before you start trying to get pregnant, and follow up every six months (more frequently if you have periodontal disease). Your treatment at these regular exams will generally include:

- Dental x-rays (once per year)
- Dental cleaning to remove plaque
- Examination of gums

If your dentist finds damage, cavities or other signs of disease in the teeth and gums, (s)he will fix them or schedule additional treatment. In the meantime, keep your teeth healthy by brushing for at least 2 minutes twice a day, flossing daily and rinsing your mouth with clean water after meals.



Get the all-clear for conception.

The moment you make motherhood a high priority, make an appointment with your care provider and your gynecologist.

Your provider(s) will want to perform a basic physical exam to gauge your current health status. Talk to your health care provider about managing current medical conditions.

Your primary care provider will probably check that your vaccinations are up to date, particularly ones for diseases that are known to cause birth defects or illness: namely **rubella** (German measles), **varicella** (chickenpox) and **hepatitis**. If you've missed any, get them at least a month before you conceive.

If you're not already taking vitamins, start taking a prenatal vitamin that has at least 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day starting at least a month prior to conceiving.

Prepare for your appointment(s), so you can give and receive all the information you need for a healthy pregnancy.

Bring along all your medications.

Talk to your health care provider about medications you are currently taking and how they affect fertility and fetal development. This includes over-the-counter medications and herbal supplements—and it includes your partner's medications.

Write down your questions and concerns. Better yet, print out a list for your provider to keep.

Bring your partner. Your care provider may have questions about your partner's health that could affect fertility. If your partner can't go with you, note any major medical concerns and questions they may have for the doctor.

Get business in order.

If you don't have a Social Security card, it's time to start the process of replacing it. With proof of Social Security numbers from both parents, you can apply for the baby's number and card when the hospital staff fills out the birth certificate. Visit the Social Security Administration website to replace your card.

Maternity leave is something you need to start thinking about as soon as possible. Research your company's policy, although it's up to you when and how to tell your boss and co-workers you're pregnant. If the policy isn't readily available, contact human resources or your personnel department. Some companies offer a leave of absence without pay through the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA.) Keep track of any unused sick or vacation time that you can use when your baby is born, and learn more about FMLA online.

Childcare choices are something you'll want to research at this point. Separating from your baby isn't easy, so it's never too early to begin looking for care that you're comfortable with: in-home care, nanny or daycare. Check references, including whether the caregiver's license is up to date.

Plan ahead for the added expenses of your baby's room, clothing and personal items. Put together a family budget if you don't have one already. Rethink your spending habits and financial goals with this in mind. Consolidate or get rid of any debt.



Am I pregnant?

Every woman experiences pregnancy differently, even from the very first days after conception. Unusual food cravings and sudden aversions are commonly reported in early pregnancy. Other women report moodiness, exhaustion, constipation or even a stuffy nose—or no symptoms at all. To further complicate the guesswork, many early pregnancy signs mimic other conditions, such as a mild cold or PMS.

A woman's first indication that she might be pregnant is very often a missed period—but even this seemingly obvious sign can be tricky. A missed period is sometimes just a missed period without pregnancy. Other times, what looks like menstruation could be implantation bleeding that just happens to occur on the usual menstruation date.

Early pregnancy signs

- Missed period or spotting (implantation bleeding) - 6 to 12 days after conception
- Light cramping - 6 to 12 days
- Mood changes
- Nausea, often called “morning sickness,” which can occur at any time of the day - 2 to 8 weeks
- Food aversions
- Breast tenderness or swelling - as early as 1 week after conception
- Fatigue
- Nasal congestion

If a missed period is among your symptoms and you have reason to believe you could be pregnant, take a home pregnancy test or see your health care provider to confirm it.





I'm pregnant! Now what?

This is an exciting time for any mother-to-be. You and your partner have prepared for and anticipated this event and it's finally come to fruition—congratulations!

Now you can relish the coming months as your body nurtures a growing baby. You'll mark important pregnancy milestones like the baby's first kick, meet some of your prenatal care providers, and start getting your home and family ready for the new arrival.

Mercy will be there for you along the way, providing the care, support and information you need for a safe pregnancy and a healthy baby.

Download Mercy's **Countdown to Baby Guide** for month-by-month information and tips.
mercy.net/pregnancyguide



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