



Healthy Pregnancy

Half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, so many mothers may not have addressed existing health concerns or changed health behaviors when they become pregnant. Most women learn they are pregnant at least five to seven weeks into the pregnancy, which is an important time for a baby's neurological development.

Before getting pregnant, discuss pregnancy plans, contraception use and general health with your doctor. Even before you become pregnant, your health can affect your future baby's health and development. Whether you do not want children, cannot have children, would like to start having children or want children in the future, have a life plan ready. [Someday Starts Now](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) have lots of information on planning for pregnancy. While you are pregnant, your health affects both you and your baby, so schedule your first prenatal exam as soon as you think you are pregnant. Prenatal care can greatly reduce the likelihood of premature birth, low birth weight, birth defects and other pregnancy concerns.

Learn more about prenatal care at [WomensHealth.gov](#). If you don't have health insurance, visit [HealthyTexasWomen.org](#) to learn more about programs that can help. You may be eligible for [Medicaid for Pregnant Women](#) or [CHIP Perinatal Coverage](#). Limited prenatal care is also available through the [Family Planning Program](#) and [Title V](#).

Prenatal Alcohol & Substance Exposure

HHS Behavioral Health Treatment for Mothers Video
<https://youtu.be/Dkpu1smVXuA>

Prenatal exposure to alcohol, tobacco and other substances can cause birth defects and permanent intellectual or developmental disabilities. Although these substances are harmful to a developing fetus, alcohol has the strongest influence.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is an umbrella term to describe neurological and behavioral effects caused by prenatal alcohol exposure, including:

- Fetal alcohol syndrome
- Partial fetal alcohol syndrome
- Alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder
- Alcohol-related birth defects

Prenatal exposure is most harmful during the first trimester, often before many mothers know they are pregnant. It is safest not to drink at any time during pregnancy or while trying to become pregnant. All types of alcohol are equally harmful to a developing baby.

Several protective factors can improve outcomes for people with FASD, such as nurturing caregiving, early diagnosis and intervention, absence of violence, a stable home environment, and access to social and educational services. Several HHS programs support families with these protective factors, such as [Early Childhood Intervention](#), [Medicaid](#) and [Navigate Life Texas](#).

For more information on FASD, visit the [CDC's Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder webpages](#) or the [National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome](#).

Prenatal Alcohol & Substance Exposure Resources

- The [Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment](#) should be used during well woman exams to prevent prenatal alcohol and substance exposure. Recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and SAMHSA, SBIRT provides early intervention and referral to treatment for people with substance use disorders and those at risk of developing these disorders.
- The [Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Toolkit](#) was developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics to raise awareness, promote surveillance and screening, and ensure that affected children receive appropriate and timely interventions.
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Services and Resources for Children’s Health

- [Early Childhood Intervention](#) is a statewide program in Texas for families with children birth to 36 months with developmental delays, disabilities or certain medical conditions that affect development.
- [YourTexasBenefits.com](#) helps you apply for Medicaid and get care for children with disabilities, including basic medical services, long-term services and supports, service coordination, service planning and transition planning. Read more about insurance and financial help for children with disabilities at [Navigate Life Texas](#).
- [Children with Special Health Care Needs](#) Services Program helps children with their medical care, mental health care, special therapies and much more. Call 800-252-8023 to learn more.
- There are many other programs that might help you or your child so if you do not find what you are looking for, we encourage you to call 2-1-1 or visit the [2-1-1 website](#).

Services, Treatment and Support Resources for Women

- [Healthy Texas Women](#) benefits include health screenings, treatment for certain conditions and contraception.
- [Family Planning Program](#) benefits include health screenings, contraception and family planning counseling.
- [Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services](#) can be accessed through outreach, screening, assessment and referral centers, local mental health authorities, or contacting [211 Texas](#) by dialing 2-1-1 or 877-541-7905.

General Prevention and Education Resources

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Folic Acid Intake

- Neural tube defects, or NTDs, are birth defects that affect the brain, spine or spinal cord. The neural tube in an embryo is a hollow structure that later forms the central nervous system, including the brain and spinal cord. By the end of the first month of pregnancy, if the neural tube does not develop correctly, the baby is born with an NTD. Spina bifida and anencephaly are the two most common types of NTD.
- With **spina bifida**, the most common NTD, the spinal cord is exposed. Cases can vary from mild to severe and can sometimes be treated with surgery. Children may have nerve damage, intellectual difficulties or paralysis of the legs. Most children with spina bifida live well into adulthood. **Anencephaly**, a much more severe NTD, occurs when the part of the neural tube that

develops into the brain does not close completely. Babies born with anencephaly are born without large portions of their brain, skull and scalp. Most children born with this condition rarely survive more than a few hours after birth.

- Up to 70% of NTDs can be prevented by taking folic acid before and during pregnancy. Since the neural tube develops so early, often before a woman knows she is pregnant, all women of childbearing age should consume 400 micrograms of folic acid through supplements or multivitamins. A woman who would like to become pregnant should also take prenatal vitamins starting at least three months before conception.

Existing Health Conditions

Studies show that diabetes and obesity in mothers lead to higher rates of birth defects that can lead to developmental disabilities. Women who could become pregnant should work with their doctors to manage these chronic conditions. Learn more about diabetes and pregnancy on the [CDC's website](#). Learn more about obesity and pregnancy on the [March of Dimes' website](#).

Medications

Certain medications increase the likelihood of birth complications or of a child being born with birth defects, including some acne medications like Accutane, statins, some blood thinners and some opioids. Taking certain medications can also increase the chances of low birth weight, premature birth and developmental disabilities. Do not stop taking medication without talking to your doctor. Learn more about prescription medication and pregnancy at the [CDC's website](#) or the [March of Dimes website](#).

Maternal Infections

Maternal infections can also affect a developing baby during pregnancy. Sexually transmitted infections, toxoplasmosis, chicken pox and rubella are just a few of the infections that increase the risk of a baby being born with birth defects. Getting vaccinated, practicing good hygiene and avoiding certain chores, such as cleaning the cat's litter box, can protect mothers from some of these infections. Your doctor may recommend vaccinations and discuss the possibility of infection during your prenatal checkups. Learn more about preventing infections before and during pregnancy at the [CDC's website](#).

Premature Birth

Premature birth and low birth weight can increase the risk of developmental disability for a child. Many of the risk factors already mentioned, such as prenatal tobacco use, alcohol exposure or maternal obesity, increase the risk of premature birth and low birth weight. Some treatments exist for women who have a higher risk of early labor, such as progesterone shots, and may be covered by health insurance providers or Medicaid or CHIP. You can learn more on the [March of Dimes website](#).