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About Our Children



## Health Care Before And During Pregnancy Makes a Big Difference

HEIDI MAE BRATT

**M**edical experts advise that women begin taking care of themselves even before they become pregnant. This is referred to as preconception health, and it means knowing how health conditions and risk factors may affect you and your unborn baby. Once a woman does become pregnant, it is imperative that she be vigilant about how she takes care of herself—and her growing baby.

About Our Children consulted with Dr. Cristina M. Maniu, an obstetrician/gynecologist with the Valley Medical Group in Ramsey, for her expertise on the topic.

**AOC:** What are the most important elements of prenatal care?

**Dr. Maniu:** The most important is getting regular and early prenatal care. Whether it's your first or your third pregnancy, prenatal care is extremely important. Preconception and regular prenatal visits can prevent complications of pregnancy and provide information to help women take care of their infants and ensure a healthy pregnancy. Schedule your first prenatal visit soon after finding out you are pregnant.

**AOC:** Has the wisdom of how to care for yourself when pregnant changed over the years?

**Dr. Maniu:** I don't think our recommendations have changed significantly. Throughout the years, we have encouraged a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, avoiding exposure to harmful substances. We continue to stress that controlling existing medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, etc., is very important to avoid serious pregnancy complications.

**AOC:** Are there any must-have tests for women to make sure that their developing babies are healthy?

**Dr. Maniu:** At the first visit, your obstetrician will do tests that will check for your general health, as well as other blood tests to check for specific condi-

tions that can cause problems for the woman and their baby, blood tests, vaginal cultures, and pap smear. At 12 weeks, your obstetrician will recommend screening/testing for genetic conditions such as Down Syndrome. At 16 weeks, a blood test can screen for spina bifida (a birth defect that affects the spine). At 20 weeks gestation, most patients have a targeted ultrasound that evaluates the fetal anatomy to make sure the baby has 10 fingers, 10 toes, look at the brain, the heart, etc. Later, at 28 weeks, women are screened for gestational diabetes.

**AOC:** What about nutrition, physical activity, and exposure to emotional environments?

**Dr. Maniu:** Eat a variety of healthy foods. Choose fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Drink plenty of fluids—especially water. Avoid processed foods, fake sugars and soda. Also, stay active. Unless told otherwise, try to get at least 3 hours of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week. Review your exercise regimen with your physician. And be sure to get plenty of sleep.

**AOC:** Any do's and don'ts?

**Dr. Maniu:** Do's include regular and early prenatal care, eating a variety of healthy foods, getting regular exercise, taking prenatal vitamins with folic acid throughout the pregnancy, getting a flu shot, gaining a healthy amount of weight (you are not eating for two), getting plenty of sleep, going to childbirth education classes. Don'ts include tobacco smoking (1st and 2nd hand smoke), alcohol use, drugs, avoid harmful medications (review your medication list with your obstetrician), avoid exposure to harmful substances, avoid fish high in mercury (tuna, swordfish). If you have a cat, don't change cat litter.

**AOC:** Anything else you would like to add?

**Dr. Maniu:** Ask your obstetrician lots of questions. There are no stupid questions.

Heidi Mae Bratt is the editor of About Our Children.



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