

Making Smart Decisions During Pregnancy

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Pregnancy can be a very exciting time, and some women feel overwhelmed by warnings and advice from family and friends. However, following certain widely-recognized guidelines can significantly impact the health of mother and baby, minimize complications and birth defects and shorten the recovery process. In fact, babies born to mothers who do not receive prenatal care are five times more likely to die and three times more likely to be of low birth weight.

One of the most important steps a woman can take to ensure a healthy pregnancy is to establish a healthy lifestyle before pregnancy. This includes avoiding tobacco, drugs and alcohol, following a healthy diet, exercising regularly and maintaining a healthy weight. Women planning to become pregnant should consult a physician for advice on lifestyle changes and healthy practices that will contribute to a healthy pregnancy.

Folic acid, a form of Vitamin-B, plays an integral role in preventing neurological defects, such as spina bifida. Adequate levels of folic acid are especially important in the first few weeks of pregnancy, before most women are even aware they have conceived. This is why most physicians recommend a daily multi-vitamin with iron that contains at least 400 micrograms of folic acid for all women of child-bearing age.

In addition, most physicians recommend dietary changes during pregnancy. Women are generally advised to avoid foods that may carry certain bacteria, such as listeria. Listeria is commonly found in foods such as ready-to-eat or undercooked meat, poultry, or seafood, and can lead to a serious infection called listeriosis, which has been linked to miscarriages, premature births, fetal blood poisoning and birth defects. Women who are pregnant should heat all deli meats until steaming and avoid unpasteurized milk products and soft cheeses (brie, feta and blue cheese) throughout pregnancy. Raw seafood, as sushi and undercooked meat products should also be avoided.

Seafood known to contain high levels of mercury is also prohibited during pregnancy. Fish such as shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish often contain high levels of mercury, a toxin that can harm a developing fetus, and should be avoided during pregnancy. Fish such as snapper, halibut, canned albacore tuna and tuna steaks may have some mercury, but are safe to consume once a week. Catfish, salmon, cod, pollock, mahi

mahi, shellfish and canned light tuna are considered lowest in mercury and are safe for consumption twice a week.

Pregnant women should continue to exercise unless otherwise instructed by a physician. Women who are active often enjoy an easier labor and shorter recovery time after birth. Most women can continue walking, swimming or cycling throughout their pregnancy, but should avoid activities that involve high impact, or those that could lead to falling.

Additional pregnancy restrictions often include the following:

- Avoid using chemicals, such as hair dye.
- Avoid hot tubs or saunas. These are considered high-bacteria environments.
- Avoid optional x-rays as radiation can be harmful to the developing fetus.
- Avoid cleaning out cat litter boxes as this is linked to a disease known as toxoplasmosis, which can cause miscarriages, stillbirths and birth defects.
- Get adequate rest. Fatigue is common during pregnancy.
- Consider getting a flu shot, which will also protect the unborn child.
- Wear a seat belt correctly, with the lap belt across the hips under the belly.

Pregnancy is an exciting time of change, but those changes can be challenging. It is important to remember that the sacrifices during pregnancy are worth the end result – a happy, healthy baby. Consult your physician about plans to become pregnant and follow his or her advice before, during and after pregnancy because women who receive routine, adequate prenatal care are at much less risk for complications and much more likely to deliver a healthy baby.