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Preparing for Baby...

By Jessie Reynolds, MD

Expecting a baby is an exciting time in a couple's life. Women attempt to eat the right foods, choose the perfect name, and make extensive lists of baby gear to have on hand when their new arrival appears. However, couples often miss one of the most important and earliest steps in working towards a healthy baby: preconception planning.

About half of all pregnancies are unintended, so all sexually active women and their partners should be aware of preconception issues. If couples are trying to become pregnant, they should consider talking with their physician about steps they can take to maximize the chances of a successful and healthy pregnancy.

Your family physician will address several areas in a pre-pregnancy visit:

- Genetic risk factors and counseling
- Screening for, treating and immunizing against infectious diseases
- Environmental toxins and exposures
- Optimizing maternal health
- Lifestyle recommendations.

Some diseases are passed from parents to children. Your doctor will discuss options for testing and take a careful family history.

Women who are of childbearing age should consider immunization against hepatitis B. Chicken pox (varicella) and rubella (German measles) vaccines should be given at least a month before conception if women are not already immune.

The brain and other organs start developing very early in pregnancy, often before a woman even realizes she is pregnant. All sexually active women, *especially those planning a pregnancy*, should minimize their exposure to

environmental toxins. X-rays should be minimized in pregnancy. Avoid prolonged exposure to pesticides, paint thinners, and strippers.

When planning a pregnancy, women should optimize their own health. Tell your doctor about your entire medical history, including all prescription and over the counter medications that you consume. Discuss ways to help you quit smoking. Avoid alcohol and other substances.

A healthy diet and regular exercise are important to every woman's health. In particular, women should consume a minimum of 0.4 mg of folic acid daily. Folate decreases the risk of problems with an infant's spine. Women with certain medical conditions like diabetes or epilepsy may be counseled to consume higher doses.

Pregnancy places stress on a couple in many ways—physically, financially, and emotionally. Planning for a pregnancy can help make sure couples are prepared as much as possible for the joy and responsibility of bringing a life into this world.

The family physicians at Little Rivers Healthcare, Ammonoosuc Healthcare and Cottage Hospital look forward to helping you grow your family, before, during and after a pregnancy. Please call our birthing center at (603) 747-9145 or visit our website www.cottagehospital.org for more details.

Cottage Hospital is a 25 bed, critical access hospital serving the beautiful Upper Connecticut River Valley. For additional information regarding Cottage Hospital and any of our services visit us on the web at www.cottagehospital.org or call (603)747-9000.

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