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HEALTHY PREGNANCY

Wellbeing during pregnancy

Pregnancy is an amazing time of new life, growth and development, so it's a time to take special care. This is because the way you look after yourself during your pregnancy will have a direct impact on your baby's development in the womb. It will also impact the long term future of your baby's development and health. This means giving attention to choosing healthy food, exercising appropriately and looking after your emotions.

The South African Department of Health support programme for pregnant mums called 'Mum Connect' links you to health advice through your cellphone.

The website is: <http://www.rmchsa.org/momconnect/>



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As soon as you suspect that you are pregnant, or this is confirmed, you need to visit your doctor or clinic. This will ensure that you have medical support throughout your pregnancy, not only to monitor the normal development of your baby, but to also be able to detect any complications early on. In this way you will have the best chance of resolving any problems and prevent a crisis. So do get medical care as soon as possible – after all that is what the doctors and clinic are there for.

By following the healthy lifestyle as described under the General Wellness section, you will have the basics of looking after yourself and your baby. Then follow that up with the health notes below that relate specifically to pregnancy.



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No, you do not need to eat for two!



There is common belief that you need to 'eat for two'. This is simply not true. During the first six months of pregnancy your baby will get all the nourishment it needs from you, if you are eating a healthy diet as described under the General Wellness section. It is only in the last few months that you may need to eat a little more to supply the baby with the energy it needs. Putting on body weight on your arms, legs, and face during your pregnancy could even make the birth more difficult. And then you might even have a bigger problem slimming down after the birth.

Important nutrients you must be sure to get

Oily fish, like fresh tuna, trout and salmon, mackerel (smoked or fresh), canned sardines and pilchards, contain omega-3 fatty acids. These are vital for the development of the baby's eyes and nervous system. Healthy oils are also found in avocados, nuts, olives (refer back to the health oils list), so do ensure that you eat at least three servings per day.



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Speak to your doctor about taking a folic acid supplement in the first 12 weeks of your pregnancy. This is needed for normal foetal development, although you will also get this from eating spinach, fresh asparagus and broccoli, you need to ensure that you are getting enough.

Also make sure you get out into the sunshine and get the sun on your skin so your body can produce vitamin D. The baby needs this for the development of the immune system, brain health, bone and lung development.



What to avoid

There is a rare bacterial infection, Listeriosis, that does not usually pose a health risk, but it can cause pregnancy or birth complications – or even miscarriage. So it is best to avoid raw or partially cooked food like sushi, soft eggs, homemade mayonnaise or ice cream made using raw eggs. Also be careful of cured meats like salami, Parma ham, chorizo and pepperoni. It may also be found in soft mould cured cheeses like brie, camembert and chèvre, and soft blue cheese like gorgonzola. Liver pâté and any pâtés including vegetable pâté are also to be avoided for the same reason.

There is some concern that too much vitamin A is not beneficial during pregnancy. So it is best to avoid liver due to its high levels of vitamin A. This includes fish liver oil supplements. Many acne treatments contain vitamin A (under various names) so do check with your doctor.

Now you may be wondering about yogurt, especially since it contains bacteria, but these are healthy bacteria so it is quiet safe to eat it during your pregnancy.



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Alcohol and caffeine

There are numerous studies into the impact of consuming alcohol and caffeine during pregnancy. The consistent message is that both of these substances can have seriously detrimental impact on the unborn baby. Some studies try to determine a safe amount, but a common agreement has not yet been reached. The basic message is that even small amounts could have a detrimental impact on the baby. So it is best to quit the consumption of both alcohol and caffeine.

Smoking

Smoking is another no-no during pregnancy. The bottom line is: quit smoking during pregnancy. The risks to the baby are just too high to take any chances. These could include ectopic pregnancy, placental abruption, miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, cot death, and even the loss of baby at birth.



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Get some rest



As your baby is growing, your body is working really hard. There are also all the hormonal changes that you are having to deal with. So rest is very important. A good eight hours of sleep at night, and even a midday nap or just a 30 minute 'feet up time' will be of great benefit.

If sleeping becomes uncomfortable as your bump grows, lie on your left side with your knees bent and place a pillow under your bump, this may ease the strain on your back.

Exercise during pregnancy

Some women are concerned that doing exercise during pregnancy might cause a miscarriage. This is not true. In fact, doing exercise and keeping fit will be healthier for both you and the baby.

Do speak to your doctor about what exercise is safe for you. In general, if you have already routinely exercised, it is safe to keep it up. If you have not been exercising then this is also a good time to start and build up your fitness.

In general start with any exercise that makes you feel warm and a little out of breath. This can include walking briskly, going up and down stairs, and even putting a bit more energy into doing



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the housework or gardening. Then you could add swimming, dancing, jogging and any suitable exercise classes. If you are beginning to exercise start with 15 minutes three times per week – building up to 30 minutes four times a week.

Do avoid pushing yourself too hard. You should aim to work hard enough so that you breathe more deeply and your heart beats faster, but not so hard that you can't hold a conversation, or that you are gasping for breath. When you're doing an exercise class, or working out in the gym, do tell the teacher or gym instructor that you're pregnant and ask their advice about checking your heart rate.

Activity improves sleep, reduces tension and anxiety, and improves circulation. In this way it reduces the likelihood of swollen feet and varicose veins. Avoid contact sports where there is a chance that your bump could be hit or you might fall. Also avoid any activity that causes jarring on the joints.

If you are already active and fit, keep up your exercise until it becomes uncomfortable, then start slowing down and change to a more gentle exercise routine.

Talk to your doctor or midwife if you have any worries about aches, pains or other issues. Generally, you should stop exercising immediately if you feel unwell or are in pain. Even if you don't have any of these symptoms, if you feel unwell, uncomfortable, or just 'not right' and you're worried, stop exercising. Listen to your body and always tell your doctor or clinic if you're worried about any pain or discomfort.

Sometimes, owing to all the changes taking place during pregnancy, keeping motivated to continue exercising may be a challenge, so get an exercise buddy who will encourage you to continue with your exercise routine.

Sources:

London, Royal College of Obstetricians and gynecologists:

<https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/patients/patient-information-leaflets/pregnancy/recreational-exercise-and-pregnancy.pdf>

NICE Public Health Guidelines 27:

<http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph27>

Baby Centre:

<http://www.babycentre.co.uk/a536361/10-steps-to-a-healthy-pregnancy#ixzz3dinfAZcs>



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Many women find being pregnant a thoroughly enjoyable experience and suffer very few unpleasant symptoms, but there are those who discover that being pregnant can lead to some uncomfortable effects. Very few of these incidental discomforts threaten either the foetus or the expectant mother – but the more enjoyable the pregnancy, the better for both mother and child.

Pregnancy Related Problems:



ANAEMIA

During pregnancy, blood volume (the amount of blood circulating in the body) increases by 40%. The increase in volume is largely due to an increase in plasma (the liquid part of blood) rather than in red (or white) blood cells. Plasma volume then, is increasing faster than red blood cell volume. Because there is a decreased proportion of red blood cells in the blood, there is also a decreased proportion of haemoglobin (the protein which carries oxygen to the body's cells), and the result can be anaemia.

Recommendations:

Make sure you have enough folic acid, vitamin B12, and the other B-complex vitamins in your diet.



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Eat foods rich in iron, such as greasy leafy vegetables, prunes, raisins, organically raised red meat and liver, and bread and pastas made from whole grain flour.

If your health care provider prescribes iron supplements, take them with vitamin C to help the absorption of this mineral. Iron supplements can also cause constipation, so eat plenty of high-fibre foods and increase your fluids intake.

Note: Do not take iron supplements unless anaemia has been diagnosed.

ASTHMA

Many women who have asthma, reduce their use of asthma medication when they become pregnant to avoid harming the foetus, and as a result, their asthma symptoms become worse. It currently appears that there is more danger to a developing foetus from frequent asthma attacks, than from taking asthma medications. Inhaled medications are normally preferred during this time because they are more localised in action. Asthma sufferers should be checked at least every four to six weeks by a physician during pregnancy. You should discuss your medication in detail with your physician.

Recommendations:

Avoid anything that might trigger an attack. Keep your bedroom, at least, as a place you can go to relax and get away from any airborne pollutants that can trigger an attack.

The Air Supply Personal Air Purifier from Wein Products is a miniature unit that is worn around the neck. It sets up an invisible, pure air shield against microorganisms (such as viruses, bacteria, and mould) and microparticles (including dust, pollen, and pollutants) in the air. It also eliminates vapours, smells, and harmful volatile compounds in the air. The Living Air XL-15 unit from Alpine Industries is an ionizing unit that is good for purifying the air in the home or workplace.

BACKACHE

Backache is common during pregnancy due to the considerable anatomical changes and stresses in the body. The increase in body weight, the muscle-relaxing effects of the hormone progesterone, and the shift in one's centre of gravity contribute to the problem.



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Recommendations:

To minimise back pain during pregnancy, do not stay in any one position for a long period of time.

Pay attention to your posture. Keep your shoulders relaxed and your back as straight as possible at all times.

Swimming is a good way to relieve the strain on the back and on all other parts of the body.

Include two to three minutes of gentle stretching exercises in your daily routine. Do not strain – stretch only to your comfort level.

Make sure your mattress is firm enough to support you, and sleep with a pillow supporting your back. Sleep on your side, not on your back.

Do not wear high-heeled shoes. High heels throw your body off balance and put extra strain on your back. Instead, wear well-fitting, well-padded flat or low-heeled shoes that support your feet and provide ample room for your toes. Be aware that you may require larger shoes than normal while you are pregnant.

Teach your partner or friends how to massage your back. You can use liniments or herbal oils.

Learn how to lift correctly, putting less pressure on the back.

When your back hurts, try soaking a small towel in cider vinegar. Squeeze off any excess and lie down on your side in bed. Spread the towel directly across your back. Relax this way for fifteen to twenty minutes.

BLADDER DISCOMFORT/INFECTION

During pregnancy, the bladder is pressed upon by an expanding uterus and must, in general, deal with far more fluids. You may need to urinate more frequently. However, the bladder may not always empty fully, so infections of the bladder are very common. These should always be treated.

Recommendations:

Avoid sugary foods. Infectious bacteria thrive on sugar.

Increase your fluid intake. Drink quality bottled or filtered water rather than tap water. Do not cut back on liquids because of urinary frequency.



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Eat plain natural yogurt every day. This helps to maintain the correct balance of natural 'friendly' bacteria in the system.

Wear cotton underwear. Avoid wearing anything tight or containing synthetic material next to your skin.

Do not douche.

BLEEDING GUMS

During pregnancy, increasing oestrogen levels cause the gums to swell and become somewhat softer than normal, and the circulation of blood to them increases. This makes the gums more prone to bleeding and infection, especially if good oral hygiene is not maintained.

Recommendations:

Be sure your diet contains enough calcium and high quality, complete proteins such as soy products.

Increase your intake of foods rich in Vitamin C, as a deficiency in this vitamin can contribute to bleeding gums.

If you smoke, quit – preferably before you get pregnant. Cigarette smoking reduces the oxygen supply to the developing foetus and also drains vitamin C from the body.

Brush your teeth three to four times daily (remembering to rinse your mouth well), and massage your gums with clean fingers when necessary. Floss your teeth daily.

See your dentist at least once during the pregnancy, and be sure to inform the dentist that you are pregnant. Do not permit him or her to take any dental x-rays while you are pregnant.



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CONSTIPATION

Hormonal changes during pregnancy have a relaxing effect on the muscles, including those of the digestive tract. The increasing level of progesterone in your system makes the bowels less efficient. The normal rhythmic contractions of the intestines slow down, and the result can be constipation. This happens most often in the third trimester.

Recommendations:

Eat fresh and dried fruit such as prunes, raisins, and figs.

Eat fresh vegetables and salads containing a variety of raw green and coloured vegetables daily.

Increase the amount of fibre in your diet. Wholegrain breads, cereals, and bran are helpful. Begin by taking two teaspoons of bran in a glass of apple juice twice daily. The bran may cause some gas until your system is used to it, but after that you should not have any difficulty.

Drink six to eight glasses of liquid, including water, each day.

Walk at least one and a half kilometres a day.

Set a regular time each day for a bowel movement. This is very helpful for digestion and elimination. Elevate your feet and legs during elimination to relax the anal muscles.

If your health care provider prescribes iron supplements, be aware that they can cause constipation. Increase your fluid intake and eat a diet high in fibre.

Do not take over-the-counter laxatives unless specifically recommended by your health care provider.



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COUGHS AND COLDS

Coughs and colds are more common during pregnancy and are often more difficult than usual to shake off. Once you have a cold, there is little you can do but let it run its course, so prevention is most important.

Recommendations:

Eat a healthy diet and increase your consumption of foods containing vitamin C

For congestion, make a steam inhaler using essential oil for eucalyptus, lavender, or lemon.

DEPRESSION

Depression is fairly common during pregnancy. It can come and go, but because of shifting hormone levels, it is not uncommon to experience at least one bout of depression at some point

during the forty weeks of pregnancy. Mood swings are common too. It is not unusual to find that you are more emotional and volatile during pregnancy. It helps if people around you are sympathetic to this and know what to expect.

Recommendations:

Do not continue to feel depressed without seeking help. Having someone to talk to and knowing that you are not alone in experiencing these feeling can help you to cope during times of depression.

Acupuncture has been used successfully for hundreds of years to treat depression.

Exercise can help to lessen depression.

Be open about fears and concerns relating to having a child. Pregnancy and childbirth are profound experiences, and many women experience feelings of anxiety about the responsibilities attached to this event. Pregnancy is a complicated emotional experience, and you should be aware that it is normal not to be happy all the time.



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If you become pregnant while taking antidepressants, consult your physician about the possible effect on the development of the foetus. Research has not found that tricyclic antidepressants such as amitriptyline (Elavil, Endep) or imipramine (Tofranil) cause birth defects, but anti-anxiety drugs such as alprazolam (Xanax) and diazepam (Valium) and monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors may increase the incidence of cleft palate and cleft lip. A report in THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL of MEDICINE in January 1997 stated that the children of mothers who took fluoxetine (Prozac) while pregnant, appeared to suffer no ill effects. The children were monitored until they were seven years old. You should not stop taking your medication without discussing it with your physician.

Bibliography:

Balch, P. A. (2000). Prescription for nutritional healing, A Practical A-to-Z Reference to Drug-Free Remedies Using Vitamins, Minerals, Herbs & Food Supplements (3rd Ed.), Penguin. Pg. 575-578.



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