

What is Prenatal Care?

Prenatal care is the medical health care recommended for women before and during pregnancy. The purpose of prenatal care is to monitor the progress of your pregnancy and the health of your unborn baby, to determine early any potential pregnancy complications, and to prevent them if possible.

Why Is Prenatal Care Important?

A recent study using data from the National Hospital Discharge Survey determined that almost one third (31%) of all pregnancies had some type of pregnancy complication or preexisting condition. Getting good prenatal care is important so that any pregnancy complications are discovered and treated early. The potential consequences (to your own health and to the health of your unborn baby) of not getting prenatal care could be serious and even result in death. Statistically, babies of mothers who do not get good prenatal care are five times more likely to die than those born to mothers with adequate prenatal care.¹

The Importance of Folic Acid

Having a healthy baby means you are healthy, too. Eat a variety of healthy foods rich in vitamins and minerals, especially foods containing folate, the natural form of folic acid. Folic acid is a B9 vitamin that is essential in the prevention of serious birth defects of the spinal cord and brain. All women of child-bearing age should take a good quality multivitamin that contains at least 400 mcg of folic acid, whether they are pregnant or not. Once you are pregnant, you need to increase the amount to 600 mcg of folic acid per day, but most prenatal vitamins will contain the correct amount of folic acid already. Natural food sources of folate are found in fortified breakfast cereals, dried beans, leafy green vegetables, and orange juice.

How Often Should I See My Doctor?

Your healthcare practitioner will give you a schedule of all the visits you should have, and unless you or your baby have special needs that merit higher risk care, most doctors follow a set routine of visits. Generally these visits are:

- about once each month for weeks 4 through 28
- twice a month for weeks 28 through 36
- weekly for weeks 36 to birth

What Should I Expect During My Prenatal Visits?

First Month Visit

Your first visit will be longer and more involved than other visits. You will be asked questions about your past and present health. This is called a “medical history.” On your first visit, you will have:

- Confirmation of pregnancy either by blood or urine test
- Your medical history
- A general physical exam
- Blood tests
- Examination and possible cultures for vaginal infections

- A pap smear
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- Counseling
- An opportunity to ask questions

Second Month Visit

During this visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- A blood test for anemia
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- Nutritional counseling
- An opportunity to ask questions

Third Month Visit

During this month's visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- A blood test for anemia
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- A chance to hear your baby's heartbeat for the first time
- Discussion of additional tests if needed
- An exam for swelling of hands and legs or fluid retention
- An opportunity to ask questions

Fourth Month Visit

During this month's visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of uterus
- An examination for swelling varicose veins and rashes
- An opportunity to hear baby's heartbeat
- A chance to see your baby for the first time on ultrasound
- A triple screen test for possible prenatal genetic defects
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check

Fifth Month Visit

During this month's visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- An abdominal exam
- An examination of your breasts
- An examination for swelling varicose veins and rashes
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- Assessment of how often your baby moves and what it feels like
- An opportunity to hear baby's heartbeat
- An opportunity to see an ultrasound
- An opportunity to ask questions

Sixth Month Visit

During this month's visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- A glucose tolerance test
- A beta strep vaginal culture
- An opportunity to hear baby's heartbeat
- An opportunity to see an ultrasound
- An opportunity to ask questions

Seventh Month Visit

During months seven and eight, your prenatal visits may increase to twice a month. During these visits you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- An examination for swelling varicose veins and rashes
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- A blood test for anemia
- Nutritional counseling
- An opportunity to hear baby's heartbeat

- An opportunity to see an ultrasound
- An opportunity to ask questions

Eighth Month Visit

During this month's visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- An examination for swelling varicose veins and rashes
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- A blood test for anemia
- Nutritional counseling
- An opportunity to hear baby's heartbeat
- An opportunity to see an ultrasound
- An opportunity to ask questions

Ninth Month Visit

During month nine, your prenatal visits may increase to weekly. During this month's visit you may have:

- An examination of the size and height of the uterus
- An examination to determine position of the baby
- An internal exam to check cervix for dilation
- Urinalysis to test for infection, sugar, and protein
- Weight and blood pressure check
- An opportunity to hear baby's heartbeat
- An opportunity to see an ultrasound
- Labor and delivery counseling
- An opportunity to discuss the birth plan
- An opportunity to ask questions

While there are no guarantees in life, taking good care of yourself and getting good prenatal care is one way to take care of your unborn baby. Regular prenatal visits help to ensure that your pregnancy is on target and that your baby is growing and healthy.

References:

1. Danel I, Berg C, Johnson CH, Atrash H. Magnitude of maternal morbidity during labor and delivery: United States, 1993–1997. *American Journal of Public Health* 2003;93(4):631–634