

About your pregnancy

Congratulations on becoming an expectant parent—this is a very exciting time in your life, even though you may be inclined to feel flat and sick at first. Your baby is very special and deserves every opportunity to get a flying start in life by growing healthily in your womb. Pregnancy is a very normal event in the life cycle and usually goes very smoothly, especially if you have regular medical care.

Why have regular checks?

Antenatal care is considered to be the best opportunity in life for preventive medicine. It is important to check the many things that can cause problems—these are uncommon, but preventable. A special possible problem is *pregnancy-induced hypertension*, a condition of weight gain, high blood pressure and kidney stress, which shows up as protein in the urine.

Areas that need to be checked include:

- blood count
- blood grouping and Rhesus antibodies (Rh factor)
- immunity against infections that may affect the baby (e.g. rubella, varicella, hepatitis B and C, HIV)
- number of babies (one or more)
- size and state of your pelvis
- blood pressure
- urine (for evidence of diabetes or pre-eclampsia)
- cervix (smear test)
- progress of the baby (e.g. size of uterus, heartbeat)
- mother's progress, including emotional state
- blood sugar (for possible diabetes).

When should you be checked?

The recommended routine is as early as possible and then every 4 to 6 weeks until 28 weeks of gestation, then every 2 weeks until 36 weeks, and then weekly until the baby arrives (usually 40 weeks). An ultrasound is usually performed at about 18 weeks.

What common things can cause problems in the baby?

- infections such as rubella, varicella and genital herpes
- diabetes (can develop in pregnancy)
- high blood pressure
- smoking—retards growth and should be stopped (if impossible, limit to 3 to 6 cigarettes per day)
- alcohol—causes abnormalities, including mental retardation, and should not be taken (if you must, drink 1 to 2 glasses of beer per day maximum)
- other social drugs
- aspirin and various other drugs (check with your doctor).

What is usually prescribed?

Folic acid is now recommended for 4 weeks and preferably 12 weeks before getting pregnant, then for the first 3 months.

No iron tablets are needed if you have a healthy diet and do not have severe morning sickness.

What important areas should you attend to?

Nutrition

A healthy diet is very important and should contain at least the following *daily* allowances:

1. Eat most:
 - fruit and vegetables (at least 4 serves)
 - cereals and bread (4 to 6 serves).
2. Eat moderately:
 - dairy products—3 cups (600 mL) of milk or equivalent in yoghurt or cheese
 - lean meat, poultry or fish—1 or 2 serves (at least 2 serves of red meat per week).
3. Eat least:
 - sugar and refined carbohydrates (e.g. sweets, cakes, biscuits, soft drinks)
 - polyunsaturated margarine, butter, oil and cream.

Bran with cereal helps prevent constipation in pregnancy.

Drink ample fluids (e.g. 2 litres of water a day).

Talk to your doctor about Listeria infection, which is contracted from fresh and unprocessed foods such as soft cheeses, pate and unpasteurised milk.

Antenatal classes

Trained therapists will advise on antenatal exercises, back care, postural advice, relaxation skills, pain relief in labour, general exercises and beneficial activities such as swimming.

Breastfeeding and nursing mothers

Breastfeeding is highly recommended. Contact a local nursing mothers' group for support and guidance if you need help.

Employment and travel

Check with your doctor. Avoid standing in trains. Avoid international air travel after 28 weeks.

Normal activities

You should continue your normal activities. Housework and other activities should be performed to just short of feeling tired. However, get sufficient rest and sleep.

When should you contact your doctor or the hospital?

Contact your doctor or seek medical help:

- if contractions, unusual pain or bleeding occur before the baby is due
- if the baby is less active than usual
- if membranes rupture and a large amount of fluid comes out
- when you are getting regular contractions 5 to 10 minutes apart.

Help is only a telephone call away.