Will I have a healthy baby? Will the baby be born with some kind of physical or mental problem? Will it be a difficult birth? These are a few questions you might have during your pregnancy. It is not possible to predict the future, but you can make smart choices to give your baby the best chance of arriving happy and healthy.

Certain substances or dietary habits could classify you as high risk. Some risk factors are alcoholism, drug addiction, smoking, poor dietary habits and too much caffeine in the diet. Many of these behaviors are associated with low birth weight, which can lead to low oxygen levels at birth, the inability of the baby to maintain his or her temperature, bleeding inside the brain, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

**Alcohol**

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant that affects many organs in your body. Many of us do not even think of alcohol as a drug. When alcohol is used excessively during pregnancy, it can affect the delicate body of your unborn baby.

Research studies have shown that alcohol passes through the placenta to the baby so that when you have a drink, the baby has one of equal strength. Because of the size and the developing system of the fetus, this can be harder on the baby than on you. Researchers have reported that babies with fetal alcohol syndrome, a condition affecting babies whose mothers consumed alcohol during the pregnancy, are smaller and lighter in weight than normal babies. They also might have severe facial malformations, heart defects and poor coordination. These are complications that persist throughout the life of your child. At present, no one knows just how much alcohol is too much.

**Bottom line:** Based on these research findings and until all facts are known, avoid alcohol during pregnancy.

**Drugs**

If you are planning a pregnancy or as soon as you suspect you are pregnant, consult your physician about drugs that are safe to use during the pregnancy.

Since most drugs pass through the placenta to your baby, take only those prescribed by your doctor. Avoid over-the-counter medicines such as laxatives, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, pain relievers and aspirin. Check with your physician before taking any drug or medication.

**Bottom line:** Don’t take a chance. Always consult your doctor.
Smoking

Smoking accounts for ten percent of infant deaths and twenty to thirty percent of low-birth-weight babies.

When a pregnant woman smokes, the nicotine and carbon monoxide from cigarettes can restrict the blood supply to the growing fetus. The restriction in turn limits the transport of nutrients and removal of body waste. Heavy smoking suppresses the appetite, so pregnant women who smoke do not gain the weight recommended during pregnancy.

**Bottom line:** Do not smoke during pregnancy.

Fad Dieting

Fad diets are not a safe practice for pregnant women. Some examples of fad diets are the low-carbohydrate diet, the high-protein diet, the starvation diet and the liquid-protein diet.

Fad diets often produce harmful bodily changes including kidney disorders and gout. When your total caloric intake is severely reduced, your baby might be smaller and lighter in weight than normal babies. Dieting during pregnancy, even for short periods of time, is very dangerous. If you are obese at the time of conception, do not attempt to lose weight during the pregnancy, but do make sound dietary choices. Ensure that you are consuming foods from all of the food groups from MyPlate, including fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy.

If you are a vegetarian, you might need additional help in planning a balanced intake of protein. Be sure to include milk, yogurt, cheese and eggs in your diet. You might also need a vitamin B12 supplement because this vitamin is found only in foods from animal sources.

**Bottom line:** Discuss your diet with your doctor or dietitian.

Nutrient Supplements

Your doctor might prescribe nutrient supplements during your pregnancy. She might prescribe an iron and folic acid supplement, routinely recommended for pregnant women.

Your doctor might also prescribe additional calcium or omega-3 fatty acids if she believes food sources of calcium or essential fats are lacking in your diet. However, taking supplements does not guarantee that you are receiving all of the nutrients you need. Foods are the best sources of nutrition. Foods from the MyPlate food groups contain many vitamins and minerals essential for the baby’s growth and development. It is important to eat a variety of foods from each of these groups throughout your pregnancy.

**Bottom line:** Don’t depend on vitamin and mineral supplements to provide all of the essentials of an adequate diet.

Caffeine

Too much caffeine consumption might cause miscarriage and complications in delivery. Expert opinions vary on how much caffeine is safe for pregnant women. Many believe that no more than 150 milligrams of caffeine per day should be consumed, while others say that up to 300 milligrams per day is safe and will have no negative effect on your baby. It is generally agreed upon that caffeine intake should be limited.

**Bottom line:** Avoid caffeine as much as possible during pregnancy.

Unsafe Foods

Pregnancy affects your immune system, which makes you and your baby more susceptible to the bacteria, viruses and parasites that cause foodborne illness.

Because of the increased likelihood of contracting foodborne illness, there are some foods that are considered unsafe for pregnant women and should be avoided completely. These foods include:

- Soft cheeses including brie, feta, camembert, Roquefort, queso blanco and queso fresco
- Raw cookie dough or cake batter
- Certain kinds of fish such as shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish
- Raw or undercooked fish of any kind, such as sushi
- Unpasteurized juice or cider
- Unpasteurized milk
- Store-bought salads such as ham salad, chicken salad and seafood salad
- Raw or undercooked sprouts such as alfalfa, clover, mung bean and radish

**Bottom line:** Completely avoid unsafe foods during pregnancy.
Conclusion
There is so much to stay away from, avoid and suspect while you are pregnant. Make intelligent choices about what you eat and drink during pregnancy, to increase your chance of having a healthy baby. A good beginning makes a difference.

Resources


