

Importance of Prenatal Care

Pregnancy can be a magical experience for moms and dads-to-be. It can also be a scary time as you prepare to bring a new life into the world. Taking care of yourself during a pregnancy plays a crucial role in the overall health and well-being of your newborn.

The first question many women might have when they find out they are pregnant is: Where do I start?

“I generally like to start with trying to make sure they are eating a healthy, well-balanced diet – so trying to aim to get five servings of fresh fruits and vegetables every day. While all of us should be doing that at baseline, it’s extremely important in a pregnancy as well to help supply the baby with the nutrients that are needed as well as mom. And try to make sure that we are hydrated – so drinking plenty of water every day. Most women are going to end up needing increased intake of water during the pregnancy because it is much easier for them to get dehydrated,” says Dr. Haley Ralph, an OSF HealthCare family medicine and prenatal care provider.

When it comes to what to avoid during a pregnancy, Dr. Ralph says that you should modify your caffeine intake – especially if you are an avid coffee drinker – while other things that could cause harm to both mom and baby should be avoided altogether.

“Try to limit caffeine intake – no more than about 200 milligrams in a 24 hour period. That’s your products like coffee, tea, and soda. Try and be mindful about how many milligrams of caffeine are in those products. And just avoiding things like [alcohol](#) and nicotine in forms of cigarettes or vaping,” cautions Dr. Ralph.

Dr. Ralph also recommends that all pregnant women take a prenatal vitamin. If you are planning a pregnancy, she says it is even more beneficial to start taking these three months before you become pregnant. However, it is never too late to start regardless of the stage of the pregnancy.

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), most prenatal vitamins contain the recommended 400 micrograms of folic acid as well as other vitamins that pregnant women and their developing fetuses need. When the baby is developing early during pregnancy, folic acid helps form the neural tube – which forms the baby’s early brain and spine. Therefore, folic acid is especially important because it can help prevent some major birth defects like [anencephaly](#) and [spina bifida](#).

In addition to taking these steps to help aid in a healthy pregnancy, Dr. Ralph says that staying up-to-date on vaccinations is also very important – especially during this precious time in your life.

“I think a lot of women are surprised to find out how many vaccines we actually recommend during pregnancy. One in particular we recommend is a flu vaccine. Pregnant women are a highly susceptible group to become severely ill or end up in the hospital from influenza, and the same goes for [COVID](#),” Dr. Ralph explains.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommends receiving the Tdap (Tetanus, Diphtheria, Pertussis) vaccine during pregnancy, ideally during the beginning of the third trimester, which provides protection against [whooping cough](#).

Dr. Ralph adds that the reason some of these vaccines are so important and highly recommended for pregnant women is because they can protect your baby before he or she is even born.

“Not only are certain vaccines recommended to women during pregnancy to protect them, but in turn it also helps protect their baby. When mom gets vaccinated, a lot of times those antibodies cross the placenta and end up in the baby’s bloodstream for even several weeks and months after the baby is born. So it helps give the baby a nice immune support and booster and protect them until they are old enough to get the vaccines themselves,” says Dr. Ralph.

Most importantly, Dr. Ralph says, is that it is never too late to start prenatal care. Whether you are planning a pregnancy, are in your first trimester, or are halfway through your pregnancy, she recommends seeing a provider as soon as you are able – and working with them on a prenatal care plan tailored to you.

“I would just say as soon as you realize and as soon as you have the time to get in and the means to get in, go ahead and get in. We want to be able to give you a standard prenatal care, get your labs done, get your ultrasound done, and set up a plan for you moving forward so that we make sure we are monitoring the pregnancy, mom, and baby very closely so that we are keeping everybody safe,” Dr. Ralph advises.

If you are looking to start your prenatal care journey, go to www.osfhealthcare.org to find a provider.