

preconceived notions

Increase your chances for a healthy pregnancy

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It's no secret that women want the "Hollywood" pregnancy, with the perfect, pre- (and post!) baby body. You know, that Bridget Moynihan-I-just-swallowed-a-beach-ball-but-the-rest-of-me-looks-great baby bump.

Okay, so we're not all actresses with access to the top trainers and nutritionists, but with the proper exercise, nutrition and prenatal care, women can be fit and fabulous before conceiving, which can lead to a healthy and comfortable pregnancy and a healthy baby, medical experts say. And isn't that what's most important?

"It is important that you be in good shape in terms of your weight before conceiving," says Dr. Janet Ross, an obstetrician-gynecologist at Touro Infirmary who delivers about 20 babies per month. "Obesity is a big problem in the United States and patients who are pregnant and obese can have problems which could increase the risk of hypertension, preeclampsia, macrosomia (a larger than usual newborn) and diabetes. It's important to reach a healthy weight before you become pregnant."

Eating the proper balance of nutrients can also contribute to a healthy pregnancy, Dr. Ross said. Women should increase their intake of folic acid at least one month before thinking about getting pregnant, she adds.

"Folic acid supplementation helps prevent neural tube defects (defects of the spinal cord and brain) in the baby." Dr. Ross recommends women who want to conceive take 400 micrograms or .4 milligrams of folic acid daily.

Folic acid can be found in dark green leafy vegetables, dark yellow fruits and vegetables, liver, nuts, legumes, whole grains and fortified breads and cereals.

Dr. Ross also encourages women to eat enough iron and calcium before they try to get pregnant. Folic acid, iron and calcium are all found in prenatal vitamins, which she encourages women to take prior to conceiving.

Pam Mather Kocke, an Algiers Point mom-to-be who is pregnant for the first time with triplets, says she started taking prenatal vitamins in January, began trying to conceive in March and got pregnant in May.

Due in late January, Pam says she's always been active, but attempted to get into "better shape" before getting pregnant.

"To lose the post-wedding and post-Katrina weight I'd gained, I joined Weight Watchers in August 2006," she says. "Unfortunately, it didn't work for me as it had in the past, which in retrospect, I find interesting. Seems like my body was holding onto those fat stores that I'd need for a triplet pregnancy. I was still very active. I went to the gym, ran races, including the Mardi Gras half marathon [last February]. I also went walking with friends after work several days a week. And yet, still—no weight loss. I even went to a personal trainer in August 2006 for about two months because I really, really wanted to be in good shape when we conceived."

Dr. Nicole Charbonnet, an OB/Gyn at Ochsner Clinic Foundation in New Orleans, who delivers about 10 babies per month, recommends that women who want to conceive begin doing daily cardio exercise six months before they plan on getting pregnant.

"They need to make sure they are of an ideal body weight," says Dr. Charbonnet. "If they're overweight, then it's difficult to monitor the baby if we can't get to the baby. If they're underweight, they may have difficulty conceiving."

She also recommends that women who want to conceive avoid smoking, drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs as well as limiting their intake of mercury which can be found in certain types of fish like shellfish, shark, swordfish and tuna.

High levels of mercury could be harmful to the fetus, she says.

Between three months and six months before trying to conceive, women should also receive their up-to-date immunizations, including the measles, mumps and rubella, tetanus, and varicella (Chicken pox).

Both doctors encourage women who want to conceive to schedule a pre-conception visit with their physicians to discuss an appropriate diet, lifestyle changes, medical history, family history and hereditary or genetic issues.

These visits will determine what steps a mom-to-be needs to take before conceiving.

Mary Catherine Moffett of Algiers Point says she didn't work out a lot before getting pregnant but said her doctor told her she was healthy.

"I eat healthy and am overall a healthy person," says Mary Catherine, who was due with her first child on Christmas. "But I'm not that person who sticks to a strict regiment, that's for sure."

Before conceiving, she says she began putting "color in her diet," eating more leafy greens and "keeping her health in check."

"I'm really blessed," says Mary Catherine. "I don't have any past medical problems."

New Orleans radio personality Tierza "TPot" Guggenheimer who co-hosts "The Afternoon Swirl" on B 97.1 was due with her first child at the end of December.

She says she began taking prenatal vitamins one month

before trying to get pregnant.

"I read it was healthier to do that," says Tierza. "But I didn't really change my eating habits. I never work out, but I'm a pretty active and jumpy person to begin with."

However, she says she wishes she did more exercise to strengthen her back before getting pregnant.

"This whole thing puts a lot of stress on your back," Tierza says. "It doesn't hurt a lot, but it does hurt."

Molly Kimball, a registered dietician with Ochsner Elmwood Fitness Center, works with about 10 women each month who are trying to lose weight before conceiving.

"If you are significantly overweight, you may have trouble conceiving," says Kimball. "I first tell them to keep a food log either on paper or online (www.fitday.com is free) and they can type in what they're eating, and for a lot of them it's really eye-opening."

She says she encourages her clients also to eat protein and carbohydrate-balanced small meals or snacks every three to four hours to boost their metabolism and prevent them from overeating.

"The general rule is that if they're eating healthy and exercising, they're going to lose half a pound to two pounds per week," she said. "If they want to start losing weight before getting pregnant, they need to start as soon as possible. We want them to get used to eating healthy up to the time of conception and throughout their pregnancy." 