

is a B vitamin that, if taken before and during early pregnancy, can help prevent neural tube defects (NTDs), which are major birth defects of the baby's brain and spine ([anencephaly](#) and [spina bifida](#)). In 1996, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandated that by January 1, 1998 all grain products labeled as 'enriched', such as breads and cereals, have folic acid added to them to help reduce the risk of NTDs. This is known as folic acid fortification.

- **Get 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day.** Folic acid is a B vitamin. If a woman has enough folic acid in her body at least one month before and during pregnancy, it can help prevent major birth defects of the developing brain and spine ([anencephaly](#) and [spina bifida](#)). Women can get folic acid from fortified foods or supplements, or a combination of the two, in addition to a varied diet rich in folate. [Learn more about folic acid](#)
- **See a healthcare professional regularly.** A woman should be sure to see her doctor when planning a pregnancy and start prenatal care as soon as she thinks that she is pregnant. It is important to see the doctor regularly throughout pregnancy, so a woman should keep all her prenatal care appointments. If you are trying to have a baby or are just thinking about it, it is not too early to start getting ready for pregnancy. Use these checklists to help you write down your goals, whether you are [planning a pregnancy pdf icon\[PDF - 3.6MB\]](#) or trying to get and stay healthy overall.
- **Avoid alcohol at any time during pregnancy.** Alcohol in a woman's bloodstream passes to the developing baby through the umbilical cord. There is no known safe amount of alcohol use during pregnancy or while trying to get pregnant. There is also no safe time during pregnancy to drink. All types of alcohol are equally harmful, including wine and beer. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, and a range of lifelong physical, behavioral, and [intellectual disabilities pdf icon\[PDF - 280KB\]](#). These disabilities in the child, which occur because the mother drank alcohol during the pregnancy, are known as [fetal alcohol spectrum disorders \(FASDs\)](#). The best advice for women is to stop drinking alcohol when trying to get pregnant. [Learn more about alcohol and pregnancy](#)

- **Avoid smoking cigarettes.** The dangers of smoking during pregnancy include preterm birth, certain birth defects ([cleft lip or cleft palate](#)), and infant death. Even being around tobacco smoke puts a woman and her pregnancy at risk for problems. Quitting smoking **before** getting pregnant is best. For a woman who is already pregnant, quitting as early as possible can still help protect against some health problems for the baby, such as low birth weight. It's never too late to quit smoking. [Learn more about smoking during pregnancy](#)
- **Avoid marijuana and other drugs.** A woman who uses marijuana or other drugs during pregnancy can have a baby who is born preterm, of low birth weight, or has other health problems, such as birth defects. Marijuana is the illicit drug most commonly used during pregnancy. Since we know of no safe level of marijuana use during pregnancy, women who are pregnant, or considering becoming pregnant, should not use marijuana, even in states where marijuana is legal. Women using marijuana for medical reasons should speak with their doctor about an alternative therapy with pregnancy-specific safety data.
- **Prevent infections.** Some infections that a woman can get during pregnancy can be harmful to the developing baby and can even cause birth defects. Check out our [10 tips for preventing infections](#) before and during pregnancy.
- **Avoid overheating and treat fever promptly.** During pregnancy, a woman should avoid overheating and treat fever promptly. [Overheating can increase a woman's chance of having a baby with a neural tube defect.](#) It can be caused by a fever or exposure to excessive temperatures (like getting in a hot tub) that increases a woman's core temperature. Protecting against infections, treating fever promptly, limiting environmental exposures known to increase core body temperatures (like getting in a hot tub), and consuming 400 micrograms (mcg) of [folic acid](#) every day can help reduce the chance of having a baby born with a neural tube defect.¹

3. Choose a healthy lifestyle.

- **Keep diabetes under control.** Poor control of diabetes during pregnancy increases the chances for birth defects and other problems for the pregnancy. It can also cause serious complications for the woman. Proper healthcare before and during pregnancy can help prevent birth defects and other poor outcomes. [Learn more about diabetes and pregnancy](#)
- **Strive to reach and maintain a healthy weight.** A woman who is obese (a [body mass index](#) [BMI] of 30 or higher) before pregnancy is at a higher risk for complications during pregnancy. Obesity also increases a pregnant woman's risk of several serious birth defects. Even if a woman is not actively planning a pregnancy, getting healthy can help boost her health and her mood. If a woman is overweight or obese, she should talk with her doctor about ways to reach a healthy weight **before** she gets pregnant. [Learn more about healthy weight](#)

- **Back to sleep.** Place your baby to sleep on his or her back, rather than on the stomach or side, every time you — or anyone else — put the baby to sleep for the first year of life. This isn't necessary when your baby's awake or able to roll over both ways without help.

Don't assume that others will place your baby to sleep in the correct position — insist on it. Advise sitters and child care providers not to use the stomach position to calm an upset baby.

- **Keep the crib as bare as possible.** Use a firm mattress and avoid placing your baby on thick, fluffy padding, such as lambskin or a thick quilt. Don't leave pillows, fluffy toys or stuffed animals in the crib. These can interfere with breathing if your baby's face presses against them.
- **Don't overheat your baby.** To keep your baby warm, try a sleep sack or other sleep clothing that doesn't require additional covers. Don't cover your baby's head.
- **Have your baby sleep in in your room.** Ideally, your baby should sleep in your room with you, but alone in a crib, bassinet or other structure designed for infants, for at least six months, and, if possible, up to a year.

Adult beds aren't safe for infants. A baby can become trapped and suffocate between the headboard slats, the space between the mattress and the bed frame, or the space between the mattress and the wall. A baby can also suffocate if a sleeping parent accidentally rolls over and covers the baby's nose and mouth.

- **Breast-feed your baby, if possible.** Breast-feeding for at least six months lowers the risk of SIDS.