

Pre-existing diabetes and pregnancy

Approximately 1 in 200 women have diabetes before they become pregnant. Today, most women with pre-existing diabetes can have a healthy pregnancy. Here's what you can do:

Keep your diabetes under control. In the first few weeks of pregnancy, poorly controlled diabetes can result in a baby with serious birth defects. Brain, spinal cord (neural tube defect) and heart defects can occur. You're also at greater risk for having high blood pressure, preterm delivery, miscarriage or stillborn baby.

Women with diabetes often have babies that weigh 10 pounds or more. This is because the woman's high blood sugar crosses the placenta to the baby. Large babies make delivery harder.

Take a multivitamin with 4-5 mg. of folic acid. The recommended dose of folic acid is higher for women with diabetes. You have up to 10 times the risk for babies with neural tube defects. Taking a vitamin with folic acid before you become pregnant and during pregnancy can reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida. You should start folic acid supplements at least one month prior to pregnancy.

Ask your doctor if you need to change your diabetes medicines. It is still unknown if diabetes pills are safe during pregnancy. Your doctor may have you switch to insulin before you become pregnant. And stay on it throughout the pregnancy.

Ask your doctor to refer you to a nutritionist for counseling. As a woman with diabetes, you likely follow a special diet already. However, the number of calories you need may change during pregnancy. Your doctor and nutritionist will look at your weight, the baby's growth, and the stage of pregnancy you are in, when they decide what your caloric intake should be. And of course, they will include foods you like! The rule of thumb is about 2,000 calories per day.

Monitor your blood sugar levels several times a day. Ask your doctor how often you should check your blood sugar levels. Your doctor may also have you check your urine for ketones. If you aren't eating enough, your body will burn fat for energy instead of blood sugar. Large amounts of ketones in the urine may mean your diabetes is not under control. It can also lead to a condition called ketoacidosis, which is dangerous but treatable. If left untreated though, it can cause death in the fetus.

Don't forget to exercise! Exercise often helps to control diabetes, keeps you strong, and makes you feel better. Be sure to talk to your doctor first. If your diabetes is poorly controlled, your doctor may advise against it.