

WHAT IS PRECONCEPTION HEALTH CARE?

'Is preconception health care a new idea?'

The Ancient Greeks and Romans knew that alcohol taken before and around the time of conception was damaging to the later development of the foetus. Many traditional societies fed special diets to their young women and men of childbearing age. Veterinarians, stockbreeders and farmers all practice preconception health care.

'Why is there renewed interest in this practice now?'

At present, one couple in six is infertile, one woman in five will suffer a miscarriage, one baby in ten is born prematurely, one in thirty is born with a congenital defect. At least one child in every ten suffers from a learning or behaviour problem, one child in five suffers from asthma, and yet the combined evidence of many eminent researchers shows that conditions such as infertility, miscarriage, low birth weight, premature birth, malformation, breastfeeding difficulties, learning problems, allergies and many more are often preventable with preconception health care.

'Are there any studies which demonstrate the effectiveness of preconception health care?'

Foresight (www.foresight.co.uk), the Association for the Promotion of Preconception Care was established in the UK in 1978. They are presently conducting a study in conjunction with Surrey University that will involve over 1100 couples, but an earlier study, which ran for two years and involved 367 couples, was completed in 1992. When the couples came to Foresight, 59% of them had some previous adverse reproductive history, including miscarriage (38%) and infertility (37%) [ranging from one to ten years standing]. By the end of the study, 89% of all the couples had given birth, including 81% of those who were previously 'infertile'. No baby was born before 36 weeks, none was lighter than 2368g. There were no miscarriages, no perinatal deaths and no malformations. No baby was admitted to Special Care. It is worth noting that in a population sample of the same size who practice no preconception health care, we would expect to see about 70 miscarriages and 12 malformations.

'What are the benefits of preconception health care?'

Preconception health care can help to –

- improve fertility and resolve infertility in both men & women
- ensure a normal, healthy full-term pregnancy (prevent miscarriage, premature birth and stillbirth)
- ensure a natural unmedicated birth
- avoid postnatal depression
- ensure successful breastfeeding
- ensure a very happy, healthy baby
- avoid birth defects

'What is the most important aspect of preconception health care?'

Probably the most important aspect is that it involves both partners equally. Another very fundamental aspect of preconception health care is improving nutrition. Every aspect of reproductive health, from formation of sperm and maturation of ova, right through to the production of good quality breast milk, is dependant on an adequate supply of vitamins, trace minerals and essential amino and fatty acids. However, refined modern diets, common lifestyle factors and environmental pollution can seriously compromise an individual's nutritional status. This is particularly an issue for older women and men who deplete their antioxidant nutrient levels over time.

For example, a CSIRO study showed that the diets of 67% of Australian women were below the RDA (Recommended Daily Allowance) for zinc, yet of all the elemental micronutrients or trace elements, zinc has the widest range of essential functions. It is involved in over 200 enzyme systems in the body and is needed for all aspects of reproductive function.

'What else does preconception health care involve?'

There are a number of other areas that require attention, and they may include –

- screening for essential trace elements (eg zinc & iron) and for toxic metals (eg lead & mercury)
- avoiding everyday environmental hazards
- avoiding common social poisons (eg cigarettes, alcohol, caffeine)
- exercising regularly, reducing stress, thinking positively
- using naturopathic medicine to treat reproductive and fertility problems in both prospective parents
- detoxifying
- treating food and chemical allergies
- treating infection, especially that of the genito-urinary type
- using Natural Fertility Management (avoiding oral contraceptives, IUDs)
- undergoing standard medical preconception checks (eg rubella)

'How long before pregnancy do we need to practice preconception health care?'

Since sperm formation can take up to 116 days, and since ova are susceptible to damage for about 100 days before ovulation, preconception health care for both partners needs to be in place for a minimum period of four months immediately preceding any attempt to conceive.

'How do we get started?'

You can begin by reading the book 'Natural Way to Better Babies' by Francesca Naish and Janette Roberts (Random House). This book is designed to be used as a self-help guide and will help you get started in making changes in lifestyle and diet before you see us for an appointment. We will then provide in depth and individualised recommendations, supplement regime and herbal medicine. Also, there is plenty of information available at www.preconception.com.au an independently written source of information sponsored by Blackmores.