

# Black Family Health Alert

## Keys to a Healthy Pregnancy: I want my nine months

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### Want A Healthy Pregnancy? Plan Before You Conceive

Every couple dreams of having a healthy baby. But did you know that delivering a healthy baby requires planning and adopting healthy behaviors by both mom and dad before conception takes place? This crucial and often overlooked time before pregnancy is called “preconception,” a period so critical it can determine the outcome of your pregnancy. One aspect of good preconception care is seeking quality medical care that will help you identify health risks that can potentially affect your pregnancy and your newborn. Every woman contemplating conceiving should have access to quality health care before the pregnancy and between pregnancies. While the majority of the focus is on the mother’s health, preconception care includes dad, because it takes two to make a healthy baby.

Why preconception care is so critical for African-American couples? While the rate of infant deaths has significantly decreased in this country over the past two decades, the U.S. is still ranked 27<sup>th</sup> among industrialized countries in infant mortality. This means that 26 other countries are doing better than the U.S. in ensuring the survival of babies. According to a 2003 report released by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), of the 4 million live births annually, nearly 28,000 of the babies died before their first birthday. The leading causes of death include birth defects, disorders related to prematurity (babies born before 37 weeks of gestation), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

(SIDS), and maternal complications. Unfortunately, the picture is bleaker for our community. The 2003 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Minority Health reports that the death rate for African-American infants is more than double the rate of white infants. Prematurity is the number one killer of black babies and sadly the NCHS reports the number of babies born prematurely continues to increase. In fact, nearly half a million babies are born prematurely in a single year. But for some of the babies who survive they are more likely to have a lifelong physical or mental disability which could bear an immeasurable emotional cost to the family. But along with the emotional investment there is also a tremendous economic toll placed on the family and society. In fact, the NCHS estimates that it will cost the U.S. nearly \$8 billion dollars a year for a life time of care for infants born with serious birth defects.

“Preterm birth is an invisible epidemic and more research is needed if we are going to combat this crisis,” says Dr. Louis Sullivan, the National Spokesperson for the March of Dimes Prematurity Campaign and former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Quality prenatal care is critical in helping to detect birth defects before the baby is born. Especially since the majority of birth defects can be prevented. Most birth defects happen in the first 3 months of pregnancy, when the organs of the baby are forming. This is the most important stage of development. Therefore, it is essential for expectant couples to have access to information about prenatal care before they become pregnant to help ensure a healthy baby.

## It Takes Two to Have a Healthy Baby

Having a healthy baby requires team work between mother and father throughout every stage of the pregnancy to ensure that their dream of having a healthy baby comes true. It is vital that the expectant couple practice a healthy lifestyle before conception. In a recent report released by The Center of Disease Control, Recommendations to Improve Preconception Health, expectant couples and health care providers can find helpful information and recommendations that encourage healthy pregnancies.

### Essential Tips for Expectant Couples to Follow to Ensure a Healthy Baby:

1. Eliminate alcohol, cigarette smoking and street drugs.
2. Exercise regularly and reduce stress.
3. Eat a well-balanced diet.
4. Obtain and maintain a healthy weight recommended by your health care provider .
5. Avoid contact with harsh chemicals at home or the workplace.
6. Talk with your health care provider about prescription medications and taking any over-the-counter drugs.
7. Discuss your family health history with your medical provider during preconception care to determine if there are any possible risks.
8. Prior to pregnancy women should begin to take a daily multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid.
9. Get any medical conditions such as obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes under control before conception.
10. Develop a support team by establishing healthy, positive and nurturing relationships

## Born Too Small Too Soon: How You Can Prevent a Preterm Birth

A baby born too small and too soon may face life threatening health problems and long-term disabilities. Ensuring that your pregnancy is full-term, lasting between 37 and 42 weeks, is one of the most important ways you can ensure a healthy birth. About 12 percent of babies in the United States are born preterm-- that's almost one- half million children (March of Dimes, 2006). While any woman can deliver prematurely, some women are at greater risk than others. African American women, women younger than 17 or older than 35, and women with prior preterm births have the greatest risks. The latest statistics reveal that preterm births are now the leading killer of black infants. The bottom line is that African American women have the highest risks for having a preterm birth regardless of their social and economic status. Nearly eighteen percent of African-American babies are born preterm, increasing their risk of suffering from cerebral palsy, blindness, hearing loss, chronic lung disease, and mental retardation.

## Raising Awareness and Reducing Risks for Preterm Births

In an effort to raise awareness of the problems of prematurity in the African-American community and reduce the rate of premature births, the March of Dimes has launched a multi-million dollar Prematurity Campaign to educate women on the signs and symptoms of premature birth. "We see from these latest statistics that the prematurity crisis in this country continues to intensify. Babies are dying and those who survive are too often left with devastating consequences," explains Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes. Most pregnancies last around 40 weeks allowing the baby to develop completely and prepare for a healthy birth. The average gestation period is between 37 and 42 weeks and is considered a full term pregnancy. However, babies born before the 37 completed weeks of pregnancy are considered premature or preterm and are at risk for serious medical health problems which may result in long term disabilities and babies born before 32 weeks are at a greater risk of dying. The earlier the infant is born the more medical complications can occur because they're underweight and their organs haven't had a chance to develop. From the moment a preterm baby is born she will require additional care in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), which has specialized medical staff and equipment designed to treat infant's specific needs.



## What causes preterm birth?

Most preterm births are a result of preterm labor which may follow a spontaneous preterm premature rupture of the membranes or PPRM (when the sac inside the uterus breaks too soon.) Presently the causes of preterm labor are not completely understood by health professionals. However, the latest research shows that many cases are triggered by the body's natural response to certain infections. But in many instances the doctor cannot determine why a woman delivered preterm. "It is important to look at the statistics and understand that we have made zero progress in the past years on reducing preterm births. Therefore, it is important that women stay in tune with their bodies during pregnancy so if they are having back pain or discharge during the pregnancy they know to come see the doctor so we can make an early diagnosis of the situation." explains Dr. Laura Riley, medical director of Labor and Delivery at Massachusetts General Hospital who focuses on high-risk pregnancy with an emphasis on infectious diseases.

## How can you prevent a preterm birth?

Planning your pregnancy before you become pregnant is the best prevention for the least amount of complications. "The most important action a woman can take is to take responsibility for her pregnancy. Don't just take your pregnancy for granted. You cannot wait for the birth of the baby without proper prenatal care and expect to have a healthy delivery and baby," says Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, the National Spokesperson for the March of Dimes Prematurity Campaign and former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. To ensure having a full term, healthy baby you must begin the necessary work the minute you decide to become pregnant or the moment you find out that you're pregnant. It is imperative that you get proper prenatal care. "The first thing a woman must do is visit her obstetrician to learn what she must do to promote a healthy pregnancy. As the pregnancy progresses it is crucial that she maintains regular check-ups to see how the pregnancy is going," shares Dr. Sullivan the founding Dean and first President of Morehouse School of Medicine.

Another critical factor for African-American women is to be aware that they are in a high-risk category. "We are discovering that African-American women are not aware that they are at risk. Women are under the impression that when they become pregnant they can simply stop the bad habits like smoking. A woman must make changes before she becomes pregnant because by that time it may be too late to change the outcome," explains Dr. Diane Ashton, deputy medical director at the National March of Dimes and assistant clinical professor at SUNY Down State Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York.

## Profile of Women Who at a High Risk for Preterm Births:

- 1 If you have already experienced a preterm birth
- 2 If you are pregnant with twins, triplets or more
- 3 If you have certain uterine and cervical abnormalities
- 4 If you are younger than 17 or older than 35

## How to Take Control of Your Pregnancy:

If you are obese, or even overweight, try and take control before you become pregnant. Here is a short do to list in anticipation of a healthy and happy baby:

1. **Start your multivitamin now and be sure to include folic acid – at least 400 micrograms per day.**
2. **Get active. Start slowly if you are sedentary. Walk a short distance daily until you average 30-45 minutes. Use a pedometer to help you count!**
3. **Educate yourself on the basics of nutrition. Start reading the labels and strive for a balanced diet. A registered dietician can help you design a balanced diet to lose weight slowly and safely.**
4. **Talk to your doctor. If you have high blood pressure, control it before pregnancy. If you have diabetes, get your sugar under control before you conceive. Poor glucose control is associated with miscarriage and birth defects.**



# What You Should Know About An Unhealthy Pregnancy

Two-years ago when LaKena and husband Nathan Marotta became pregnant with Arianna, she started a daily blog on [shareyourstory.org](http://shareyourstory.org), a March of Dimes website, developed to provide resources and support for families coping with issues resulting from an unhealthy pregnancy. Both in their 30's LaKena and Nathan were a happy, healthy and hard working couple who were excited to learn they were going to have a baby. Like most couples they were looking forward to an uncomplicated pregnancy and expected to deliver a healthy baby. "I was perfectly healthy one week and then the next week my blood pressure shot through the roof" says LaKena. When she was 24 weeks pregnant, LaKena developed preeclampsia and was unexpectedly put in the hospital and was on bed rest for two-weeks. "Overnight my health changed drastically and I became very sick. Since LaKena's blood pressure remained high and the complications were increasing after considerable discussion with their doctors, LaKena and Nathan's baby was delivered preterm at only 26 weeks gestation. "It was an uphill battle for Arianna because she was exposed to everything. She had to have a procedure on her heart valve because it wouldn't close, followed by heart surgery that lasted 2 days. Then she experienced bleeding on her brain. We brought her home on oxygen which she needed for the first year of her life," shares LaKena. Because of the brain bleeds, two-year-old Arianna has developed a mild case of cerebral palsy and epilepsy. "Our daughter is a blessing and because of her we have learned to appreciate the little things. Now I tell every pregnant woman I meet to eliminate the stress in their life if they want a better chance of having a healthy baby," says LaKena who proudly boasts about how excited she and Nathan get every time Arianna reaches a new milestone.

LaKena is among many African-American women who are increasingly experiencing unhealthy pregnancies because of the development of an unforeseen disease at some stage in their pregnancy.



### Here Are Some Tips For Staying Healthy In Pregnancy

1. Make sure you get prenatal care as early as possible, and definitely within the first trimester.
2. **Maintain a healthy and balanced diet**
3. Exercise moderately.
4. **Get plenty of rest.**
5. Keep scheduled appointments with your health care provider.

6. **Continue to take prenatal vitamins with 400 micrograms of folic acid and iron supplements.**

7. Try to stay within the recommended weight gain of 25-35 pounds.

### About Preeclampsia

Preeclampsia is a silent disorder that affects many African-American women during pregnancy. It is also known as toxemia, a complex disorder that affects about 5 to 8 percent of pregnant women. You're diagnosed with preeclampsia if you have high blood pressure, non-gravity dependant swelling of your hands, abdomen or face (it is very common to have swelling in your lower legs during pregnancy) and protein in your urine after 20 weeks of pregnancy. The condition most commonly shows up after you've reached 37 weeks, but it can develop any time in the second half of pregnancy, as well during labor or even after delivery (usually in the first 24 to 48 hours). It is also possible to get preeclampsia before 20 weeks, but only in rare cases. Preeclampsia can range from mild to severe, and it can progress slowly or rapidly. The only way to get better is to deliver your baby. Therefore it is very important that the expectant mother is aware of the symptoms that signify that she may need medical attention. Unusual swelling of the face and hands are early signs and can later be followed by headache and pain in the right upper quadrant of the abdomen.

### What You Should Know About Gestational Diabetes:

According to the CDC, gestational diabetes (GD) is the leading culprit affecting African-American women throughout the U.S. This is a type of diabetes that some women develop during pregnancy. Overall GD is a serious health concern since approximately seven percent of all pregnancies are complicated by the disorder, resulting in more than 200,000 cases annually. "Although African-American women are at greater risks than any other ethnic group we are not clear why," says Dr. Diane Ashton, deputy medical director for the March of Dimes and assistant professor at SUNY Down State Medical Center in Brooklyn. During pregnancy, your hormones make it more difficult for your body to use insulin, so your pancreas needs to produce more of it. For most pregnant women, this isn't a problem. As your need for insulin increases, your pancreas responds by secreting more of it. But when a woman's pancreas can't keep up with the body's demand for more insulin her blood glucose levels get too high, the result is gestational diabetes. For most women once she delivers, the gestational diabetes goes away. However once you've had it you're at higher risk for getting it again in a future pregnancy and for becoming diabetic later in life.

### Tips to help Control Gestational Diabetes:

1. Follow scheduled appointments to monitor recommended diet and glucose levels.
2. If you are on insulin injections be aware of symptoms of low blood sugar explained by your doctor.
3. The closer you get to term be sure to monitor baby's activities/kick-counts.

### Best Foods for Folic Acid:

- \* **Fortified breakfast cereals such as**
- \* **Lentils**
- \* **Asparagus**
- \* **Spinach**
- \* **Black beans**
- \* **Peanuts (only if you do not have a peanut allergy)**
- \* **Orange Juice (from concentrate is best)**
- \* **Enriched breads and pasta**
- \* **Romaine lettuce**
- \* **Broccoli**

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