



Ann Douglas is an award-winning writer and the author of 27 books, including the bestselling *The Mother of All Pregnancy Books*, *The Mother of All Baby Books*, *The Mother of All Toddler Books*, *The Mother of All Parenting Books*, and *The Mother of All Pregnancy Organizers*. You can find book excerpts, articles, tip sheets, and more by visiting Ann's website at www.having-a-baby.com.

Conception Countdown Planning for a Healthy Pregnancy

by Ann Douglas

Hoping to win at Baby Roulette? Before you and your partner toss the birth control in the trash and embark on any serious babymaking efforts, you've got some important decisions to make. The choices you make right now are every bit as important to your future baby's health and well-being as the decisions you make *after* the pregnancy test comes back positive.

Here are ten steps you should plan to take in the year prior to conception.

SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR AHEAD OF TIME

1. What's up, doc?

A generation ago, your doctor would have thought you were crazy if you called to set up an appointment to talk about your conception plans. Today, it's fast becoming the norm for couples to book a preconception health checkup. You may have to do a little arm-twisting to get your partner to accompany you to your appointment—a lot of guys feel that their role in Operation Conception is limited to heading up the elite Sperm Squadron forces!—but, whether he's prepared to admit it or not, your partner also needs to do a little preconception health planning of his own.

2. Testing one, two, three

I know, I know... lying spread-eagled on an examination table isn't my idea of a good time either, but the experts are pretty much unanimous on this point: the ideal time to schedule a pap test is before you start trying to conceive. That way, should anything abnormal show up, you and your doctor will be able to deal with the problem prior to rather than during your pregnancy.

3. All systems go

You wouldn't even dream of heading off on a cross-country expedition without checking to ensure that your car's equipment was in good working order. Well, you're about to embark on the ultimate of journeys—the journey to motherhood—so it's even more important to make sure that your body is firing on all cylinders. Your doctor will generally give you the green flag if you are in reasonably good health (e.g. any chronic health conditions, such as heart problems, diabetes, or high blood pressure are under control, and you haven't tested positive for any sexually-transmitted diseases such as chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhea). Your doctor may also want to talk to you about any hazards that you may face in the workplace—strenuous working conditions or exposure to hazardous agents, for example—since they may impact on your pregnancy as well.

4. The human pincushion

Don't relish the thought of being turned into a human pincushion? Chances are you won't have to. While it's always a good idea to have your immunity to both rubella (German measles) and chickenpox checked before you start trying to conceive, most adult women are immune to these two diseases. If it turns out that you're not, it's time to roll up your sleeve: both diseases can be devastating to the developing baby. What's more, if contracted during pregnancy, chickenpox can pose significant health risks to the pregnant woman as well.

5. Shaking your family tree

Something else you might want to do before you and your partner move into the "action phase" of baby-making is to find out what types of skeletons are swinging from your family tree. Certain types of birth defects and serious—even fatal—diseases are genetic in origin, and it's possible that you and your partner may be carriers for certain types of these inherited diseases. A geneticist can help you to determine your odds of giving birth to a healthy baby.

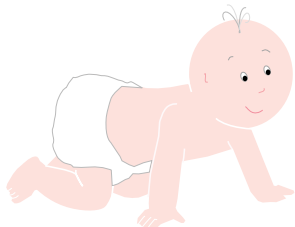
THREE MONTHS AHEAD OF TIME

6. Lifestyle makeover

If your idea of vigorous exercise involves wrestling with your partner for the TV remote, there's no time like the present to start being more physically active. Not only will you strengthen your heart and lungs—two organs that get a considerable workout during pregnancy—you'll also be better psychologically equipped to weather the emotional highs and lows of pregnancy. And if you're carrying around a few extra pounds, this is the perfect time to deal with that problem, too, and reduce your risks of experiencing certain types of fertility problems and pregnancy complications. (Studies have shown that women who are significantly over- or underweight face an increased risk of infertility, and overweight women face an increased risk of requiring a cesarean delivery or experiencing other pregnancy-related complications). Of course, crash dieting is a definite no-no. That can send your body into starvation mode, which will hamper—not help—your chances of conceiving anytime soon.

7. Nutrient check

Your baby needs a whole cocktail of nutrients in order to grow and develop—nutrients that you may have a hard time serving up if you end up battling morning sickness during your first trimester. That's why it's important to try to "stockpile" as many as these nutrients as possible prior to pregnancy. At the top of your nutrient wish list should be folic acid—a "miracle nutrient" that has been shown to dramatically reduce the incidence of such neural tube defects as anencephaly and spina bifida if taken in the months leading up to and during the first trimester of pregnancy. How much folic acid you need will depend on your individual and family health history: if you've previously given birth to a baby with a neural tube defect or if you have epilepsy, anemia, insulin-dependent diabetes, or certain other health conditions, your healthcare provider may recommend that you consume a higher than average amount.



WHEN YOU'RE READY TO START TRYING TO CONCEIVE

8. Kick any remaining bad habits

You don't have to be a saint to be a candidate for motherhood, but it doesn't hurt to have a few saintly habits. Since no safe level of alcohol consumption has been established for pregnancy, most doctors suggest that you abstain entirely rather than flirting with the possibility of giving birth to a baby with serious developmental and behavioral problems, and other anomalies. Ditto for street drugs: they're just plain bad news for babies and mothers-to-be. And as for smoking: well it shouldn't be news to you that smoking's a no-no, too. Not only has smoking been linked to premature birth and low-birthweight babies: it can also increase your newborn baby's susceptibility to SIDS and other health problems.

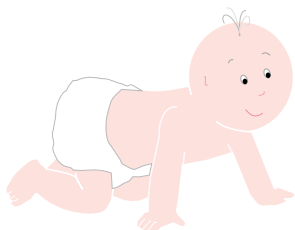
9. Slam the medicine cabinet shut

Don't pop any medication in your mouth—prescription or over-the-counter—without checking with your doctor to ensure that it's safe to use once you start trying to conceive. (He may want to fiddle with your prescription meds a little—perhaps changing you to a less harmful drug or taking you off medications altogether for the foreseeable future.) Bear in mind that even “natural” herbal products can pose a significant risk to a developing baby, particularly since many of these products have not been tested on pregnant women.

10. Lose the birth control

The final step in your countdown to conception is to lose the birth control. If you've been using the birth control pill or some other form of hormonal birth control (e.g. implants or injections), you'll need to wait for at least one normal period before you start trying to conceive—something that makes it easier for your caregiver to pinpoint your due date. If the intra-uterine device (IUD) has been your birth control method of choice, you'll still need to put on the brakes momentarily: most doctors recommend that you wait for at least one normal period before you start trying to conceive.

While there are no guarantees in the reproductive world, it only makes sense to do what you can to tilt the roulette wheel in your favor. With any luck, you'll walk away with the ultimate prize: a healthy baby.



DADDIES IN WAITING

Preconception planning isn't just a girl thing. It's also important for fathers-to-be. Here are some important health issues you and your partner should be thinking about if there's a baby in your future:

Workplace exposure to lead, mercury, anesthetic gases, biological hazards, pesticides, herbicides, radiation, or other health hazards on the job: These can affect a man's fertility and/or the health of his offspring.

Medication use: Some medications are fertility impairing while others are linked to fetal abnormalities. The jury's still out on most herbal products.

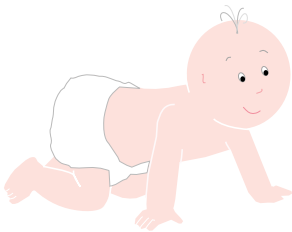
X-rays to the groin area: One U.S. study indicated that such paternal x-ray in the year prior to conception can affect a baby's growth rate.

Weight: The excess quantities of the female sex hormone estrogen that can be found in overweight men can interfere with communication between the testes and the pituitary gland, hampering a man's fertility.

Groin injuries: Athletic injuries can temporarily or permanently hamper fertility and sexual function. What's more, some research links long-distance cycling with groin numbness and impotence.

Avoid overheating the genitals: Wearing tight clothing, soaking in hot tubs, and otherwise overheating the testicles can interfere with sperm production and leave a man less fertile.

Skip the vices: Cigarettes, street drugs, and excessive alcohol use have all been linked to reduced fertility and other negative health effects.



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Page One Productions Inc.
3108 Frances Stewart Road
Peterborough, Ontario
K9H 7J8 Canada
Fax: 705-742-9672
ann@having-a-baby.com

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