

The Pre-Pregnancy Journey



5.5 million

pregnancies in the U.S. each year¹

3.5 million

births in the U.S. each year¹

27

average age of first-time mothers¹

Women have varied pathways to motherhood, and each woman's path is unique—shaped by her personal health and life circumstances.

While many women plan their pregnancies, 42% of pregnancies in the United States are unplanned.² Whether you plan your pregnancy or not, some important factors to consider to promote the best health for you and your baby include existing health conditions, lifestyle, support systems, and access to health care. Making healthy decisions, especially before a pregnancy, can benefit both a mother's and baby's health during and after birth.

Pre-pregnancy Counseling

Have you considered going to your health care provider for a *pre-pregnancy check-up*? This appointment can be with your primary care or a **maternal health** provider — ideally with a provider that you will continue to see throughout your pregnancy. During a pre-pregnancy check-up, the provider will focus on checking your physical and mental health, and risks for **complications** during pregnancy. They may also discuss with you how lifestyle, medications, and vaccinations can affect your health during and after pregnancy. Regular dental and eye health check-ups before and during pregnancy are also important.

Maternal health refers to the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of a woman before, during, and after pregnancy.



Pre-pregnancy Food for Thought

What small positive changes can I make in my life now to improve my and my baby's health during and after pregnancy? For example: a 10-minute walk each day, a green vegetable with my meal, or 5-minute meditation before bed.

¹ Osterman MJK, Hamilton BE, Martin JA, et al. National Vital Statistics Reports. 2024;73(2).

² Rossen LM, Hamilton BE, Abma JC, et al. Vital Health Stat. 2023;2(201).

Living with a chronic health condition, such as diabetes, lupus, or a thyroid disorder, makes it especially important to work with your health care providers before pregnancy to talk about how your health and treatment plan may change during and after pregnancy.

Preconception health care can improve maternal health outcomes and lower health care costs, especially for women living with chronic conditions like diabetes or depression.

This is also key for women who are diagnosed with mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, or chronic stress. Be sure to tell your doctor about any health conditions you currently have or have had in the past.

- Not all women have access to a health care provider before pregnancy, but there are still options. You can access pre-pregnancy health services through community health centers and public health clinics, which often offer low-cost or sliding-scale care based on financial need.

Some women – including women over age 35 and women of color – are at higher risk for certain **complications** that may occur during pregnancy. However, by working with a good health care provider to regularly check and monitor mom’s health and baby’s growth, and combining the support of family and friends, women can stay ahead of challenges as much as possible.

As women continue to ask questions and learn about **maternal health**, they can become stronger advocates for themselves, their bodies, and their babies. The knowledge gained during this time can benefit both mother and child for life.

Visit the *Pregnancy Journey* section of the **SWHR Journey to Motherhood: A Patient Empowerment Guide** to learn more about **maternal health** warning signs and recommended appointment schedule.

Maternal Health Care Providers

There are many kinds of health care providers that can be part of your pre-pregnancy, **prenatal**, and **postpartum** care. It is important to identify providers that can support your pregnancy and motherhood goals and preferences; this may be one or multiple providers on your health care team.

PRIMARY CARE PROVIDERS

- **Family Physicians** can provide general women’s health care and help with family planning for their patients.
- **Obstetricians-Gynecologists (OB-GYN)** specialize in female reproductive health and provide women’s health care during pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, childbirth, and immediately after delivery.
- **Nurse Practitioners** can specialize in obstetrics and gynecology (OGNP) and provide women’s health services.
- **Midwives** are trained to help low-risk women during labor and delivery, as well as provide **prenatal** and **postpartum** support.

- Do I trust my health care provider? Am I comfortable sharing my concerns with them? How easy is it to get an appointment? Do they listen and respond to my concerns?



OTHER MATERNAL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

- **Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility (REI) Specialists** are OB/GYNs board certified for their advanced knowledge to help diagnose, treat, and overcome infertility challenges in both men and women.
- **Maternal-Fetal Medicine (MFM) Specialists** provide treatment and care to women who have complicated or **high-risk** pregnancies.
- **Doulas** are non-medical professionals trained to provide emotional and physical support and guidance to women during pregnancy, labor, delivery, and **postpartum**.

- The utilization of midwives has increased in the U.S. for low-risk pregnancy care – from ~8% to ~11% between 2012 and 2022.³

Additional pregnancy-related support might be provided by an endocrinologist, genetic counselor, **perinatal** mental health professional, social worker, community health worker, or **lactation** specialist, among others.

Consider how your chosen providers' training, expertise, and approaches to practicing **maternal health** care may influence how (and even where) you give birth. In particular, it is helpful to consider a team member who will provide continuous support to you during labor and delivery in addition to a medical provider as that has proven to provide better health outcomes.

- Many prenatal, childbirth, and newborn health care services are considered essential health benefits that insurance – including **Medicaid** ACA expansion programs – must cover, according to the **Affordable Care Act**. Check your insurance provider or Health Insurance Marketplace to learn about what options are available to you, especially for low or no cost.

Planning for the Road Ahead

Pre-pregnancy can be an opportunity for women and their community of support to plan for key **prenatal** pregnancy health care visits. When planning for pregnancy, some areas to consider include:



Transportation: How will I get to my health care appointments? Can my health insurance cover transportation costs to my appointments? Does my provider offer telehealth appointments?



Language: Would an interpreter be helpful for me or my partner to better understand what's going on during my appointments?



Insurance: Do I have health insurance for my prenatal care? What does my insurance cover and what am I responsible for covering?



Work: How much leave do I have to use for my medical appointments? Will appointments early morning or later in the day best fit my work schedule? How much advance notice do I need to give my job to make sure I can attend all my appointments?



Childcare: Do I need childcare when I go to my medical appointments? Who can watch my other children in case of an urgent or last-minute appointment?

Your state may have **Medicaid** or other programs that offer **Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT)** services to cover transportation costs associated with your prenatal care appointments.

³ American College of Nurse-Midwives. Midwife Workforce Study. Available at: <https://midwife.org/midwifery-workforce-study/> Accessed 10 Apr 2025

Creating a Supportive Environment

Your close environment can affect the health of your pregnancy and your baby. Consider discussing your pregnancy plans with your partner and others who will spend a lot of time in your space. While you may not be able to control everything in your environment, your health care provider may have some advice to help you to minimize exposure and your **maternal health** risks.

HEALTH TOPICS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR PROVIDER

- Any medications, including herbal supplements and over the counter drugs, that you take regularly and/or occasionally
- Exposure to any harmful substances or materials (e.g., tobacco, lead, mercury, or pesticides) at home or at work
- Current diet and physical activity routine
- Recent or missed vaccinations
- Family history of physical and mental health conditions (you and your partner)
- Previous pregnancy experiences

In addition to establishing a community of support among family and friends, there may be resources available to you in your local area or within the health care system:

- **Patient navigators** can help set up appointments and communicate with insurance companies.
- **Community programs** can offer food pantries, diaper banks, assistance with **lactation** or breastfeeding services and getting a car seat.
- **Public assistance programs** include supplemental nutrition assistance funds and vouchers that can vary by state, but are offered in all 50 U.S. states, territories, and the District of Columbia.
- **Support groups** have been created to assist women from pre-pregnancy through motherhood, and for all kinds of special circumstances related to pregnancy.

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- **Patient navigators have many different** •
- **names. In your setting, they might be** •
- **called a patient advocate, community** •
- **health worker, care coordinator, maternity** •
- **care specialist, or peer support specialist.** •
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A great resource for connecting individuals to community services (such as food, housing, and health care) is the national helpline **2-1-1**, hosted by United Way.

