

Healthy lifestyle before conception may increase likelihood of a healthy pregnancy

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Leading a healthy lifestyle in the months prior to conception as well as during pregnancy could potentially decrease the chance of complications such as pre-eclampsia or premature birth, according to a new study led by scientists at King's College London.

Researchers suggest that maintaining a [healthy weight](#) and [blood pressure](#) prior to conception, could boost [women's](#) chances of an uncomplicated [pregnancy](#), and say these findings could help women make informed [lifestyle changes](#). They also hope these results will inform both healthcare professionals and policy makers regarding advice for pregnant women or those thinking of having a baby.

The study, published today in the *BMJ*, monitored over 5000 first-time mothers in New Zealand, Australia, the UK and Ireland, and is one of the first to investigate factors leading to a normal pregnancy rather than factors which could have an adverse effect. It was supported by Guy's and St Thomas' charity and baby charity Tommy's as part of the International SCOPE Consortium, a project funded by governments and charities.

A comprehensive set of data including details about medical histories and dietary information was collected by interviewing and examining participants as well as through questionnaires. Participants also underwent an ultrasound scan between 19 and 21 weeks and had maternal measurements such as blood pressure monitored. The outcome of pregnancies and infant measurements were collected after birth by

research midwives.

The scientists found that a [healthy diet](#), which should include a high intake of fruit (at least three pieces a day), both before and during pregnancy, was linked to an increased chance of an uncomplicated pregnancy. They also discovered that a healthy body mass index (BMI) and decrease in blood pressure are important factors in increasing the chances of an uncomplicated pregnancy, all of which can be adjusted through lifestyle choices.

The researchers also found that participants who were in paid employment at 15 weeks gestation were less likely to experience complications. It is suggested that this may be because women who are employed at this stage of pregnancy are less likely to abuse drugs and could be more likely to have an income which allows them to eat more healthily.

The authors speculate that if [high blood pressure](#), as an example, could be tackled, the proportion of uncomplicated pregnancies could increase by 3.1%. This would equate to 24,674 more women having an uncomplicated pregnancy. However, the researchers say these potential figures must be interpreted with caution as further studies are needed.

Dr Lucy Chappell, lead author from the Division of Women's Health at King's College London, said: 'We have always known that a mother's general health is important, but until now we did not know the specific factors that could be associated with a normal pregnancy. Although this is an early study, these findings suggest that by leading a healthy lifestyle both before and during pregnancy – including eating lots of fruit and maintaining a healthy BMI – it could be possible for women to increase the likelihood of experiencing an [uncomplicated pregnancy](#).

'More research needs to be done to explore these associations further but

I hope that this research will help inform both public health policy makers and healthcare professionals giving advice to [pregnant women](#) and those thinking of having a baby.'

Jane Brewin, Chief Executive of baby charity Tommy's, said: 'This exciting research shows that simple steps such as eating well could help more women to have a trouble-free pregnancy, avoiding serious complications such as pre-eclampsia and [premature birth](#). It joins a growing body of evidence that leading a [healthy lifestyle](#) before becoming pregnant can be just as important as being healthy during pregnancy.

'Currently not enough is being done to promote all-round wellbeing for expectant mums and those planning a family, and this study shows that it's important to reach out to women with practical tips and ideas on physical and mental health, to give every woman the best chance of a complication-free pregnancy.'

More information: Exploration and confirmation of factors associated with uncomplicated pregnancy in nulliparous women: prospective cohort study, *BMJ*, 2013.

Editorial: Sharper focus on uncomplicated pregnancy, *BMJ*, 2013.

Provided by King's College London

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