

# Lifelong health begins before birth

14 April 2015, by Mallory Powell



Credit: George Hodan/public domain

We've long known that a pregnant mother's alcohol and tobacco use can harm a developing fetus, but we're now learning much more about how a baby's first nine months before birth can affect its health into adulthood.

The environment of the womb, which is determined by a mother's health, lifestyle and surroundings, can alter the development of a fetus with permanent and lifelong implications. This concept of "fetal programming" explains some of the developmental origins of health and disease, including a child's increased risk for obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease as an adult.

In addition to alcohol and tobacco cessation and eating a well-balanced diet high in fruits, vegetables and healthy sources of proteins, proper weight gain and exercise and good mental health during pregnancy are especially important for a baby's lifelong health. Pregnancy is a critical window, and even if you've never exercised, watched your weight, or actively tended to your [mental health](#) in the past, investing in yourself for the nine months of pregnancy could have implications for the next 100 years of your child's life.

- **Weight gain:** Gaining too much or too little weight during pregnancy can negatively impact your child's [future health](#) and growth, affecting metabolism, energy, appetite control, and possibly increasing their risk for obesity. How much weight you should gain during your pregnancy depends on your weight prior to pregnancy. A woman of normal weight should gain about 20-25 lbs.; overweight women should gain 15-20. For obese women, harm has not been shown if they don't gain any weight. Consult your doctor to determine what's right for you.
- **Exercise:** For appropriate [weight gain](#) during [pregnancy](#), exercise is fundamentally important. Exercise also provides numerous benefits to the pregnant mom, and there is early evidence that maternal exercise may improve long-term health outcomes in the next generation. Moderate exercise for at least 30 minutes most days of the week is recommended for the majority of pregnant women without complications. Consider gardening, swimming and walking or other fun activities that will keep you off the couch. Strenuous exercise should be done in consultation with your physician.
- **Stress and anxiety:** Research suggests that maternal stress—whether from normal life events, financial concerns, poverty, or abuse—is associated with pre-term birth and can affect the development of a baby's brain and immune system. Talk about your concerns and feelings with people you trust, do things that help you relax, and rely on your support network. If you think you might be experiencing depression, talk with your [health care provider](#) right away.

**More information:** For more information on healthy pregnancy, visit [www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topic... althy-pregnancy.aspx](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topic...althypregnancy.aspx)

Provided by University of Kentucky

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