

Preparing for Pregnancy

By Dr Kelly Loi



Preparing yourself to conceive requires more than taking good care through diet and exercise. A thorough medical screening is also important to ensure you are in the best of health.

If you are ready to be a mother, congrats! The miracle of conception and birth is an exciting experience. But being pregnant also brings its own challenges. This is why a pre-pregnancy screening is important. It can help you be more prepared by ensuring that you are in the best of health. Identifying any medical issues early can also help you and your doctor take preventive steps against anything untoward.

All about the screening

A thorough medical history is a basic part of the screening process. Another basic test is a pelvic exam and ultrasound. These will determine if there is any infection or sexually transmitted disease, and detect any problems with the uterus and ovaries, such as fibroids or cysts. A Pap smear to retrieve some cells from the cervix will determine any abnormalities of the endocervical canal. A series of blood tests is also performed.

Genetic screening

Having your medical history taken and discussing your personal and family history of illness may help to determine if there is a risk of hereditary or genetic conditions. Some inherited genetic conditions that can affect the foetus include thalassaemia, cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anaemia, and Tay-Sachs disease. A parent may carry the genetic anomaly. However, as a carrier, he or she does not have signs of a disease but can pass it on to his or her children. Further genetic tests may be offered if there are any risks of such conditions. If the tests reveal that a parent is indeed a carrier, the other parent is tested as well. Should both parents be carriers, the chance of having a baby with the genetic

disease is high. It may then be helpful to seek advice from a genetic counsellor or a fertility expert.

Rh-testing

Another blood test that is commonly performed is to identify your blood type and Rhesus D antigen (Rh) status to reveal any Rh incompatibility. This is a condition that develops when a pregnant woman has Rh-negative blood and the baby in her womb is Rh-positive. When red blood cells from the unborn baby cross into the mother's bloodstream through the placenta, her immune system treats the Rh-positive foetal cells as foreign objects and attacks them. Knowing the Rh status in advance means that this can be prevented and the foetus kept safe.



Screening and vaccinations

Blood tests also flag diseases such as hepatitis B, HIV and syphilis. If they are present, effective pre- and post-natal intervention can be offered to decrease the risk of mother-to-child transmission. A rubella screening or vaccination also forms part of the process to prevent the risk of contracting the disease during pregnancy. Congenital rubella can cause birth defects such as deafness and blindness.

Fertility tests

These tests, including hormone blood tests, may be useful for couples who have been trying to conceive for a while. The father-to-be may also consider getting a sperm analysis as about half the number of infertility cases are related to sperm quality.

It is best to do these important – and safe – pre-pregnancy tests about six months before you begin trying to conceive. This is to ensure you have time to complete important vaccinations against Rubella, Hepatitis B and cervical cancer first. With all the relevant information in hand, your doctor is in the best position to ensure that yours is a healthy pregnancy.