

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Don't Just Conceive: Preconceive!

It is every prospective parent's dream to have a child who is happy, bright, engaging, and healthy enough to experience life to its fullest. Whether you are thinking of trying to conceive for the first time or have been down this road before, we would like to help you improve your chances of making this dream come true, just as we have for countless men and women under similar circumstances.

In fact, it was nearly a decade ago that the idea for *Before Your Pregnancy* came into being. At the time, Amy, a registered dietitian, exercise physiologist, and personal trainer, was working with patients and private clients who were pregnant—with or without complications—or within a year or two of having had a child. She was impressed by their motivation and surprised by the number of times she heard the remark “If only I knew then what I know now, I'd have taken better care of myself before I got pregnant.” It got her thinking about why there wasn't more emphasis from the medical community on health during the months before conception. After all, the scientific literature was brimming with new information on ways women and men could prepare their body for conception and improve the baby's health, actions that often *only* made a difference if begun one to three months before trying to conceive. Unfortunately, virtually none of this information was widely available to the general public.

Determined to get the word out, Amy wrote and produced a video and accompanying booklet entitled *Before Your Pregnancy* that provided preconception nutritional and exercise advice. (Coincidentally, she became pregnant while making the video, giving her a chance to practice what she preached!) One of the professionals who edited the text, Dr. Lisa Mazzullo, a board-certified ob/gyn and assistant professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Northwestern

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University Medical Center, happened to teach “Maybe Baby” classes at her hospital, covering the same topics from a medical and psychological point of view. The response to the video and preconception classes was so great that we, Amy and Lisa, ultimately decided to pool our expertise and create the book you hold in your hands, a complete resource for couples considering having a baby.

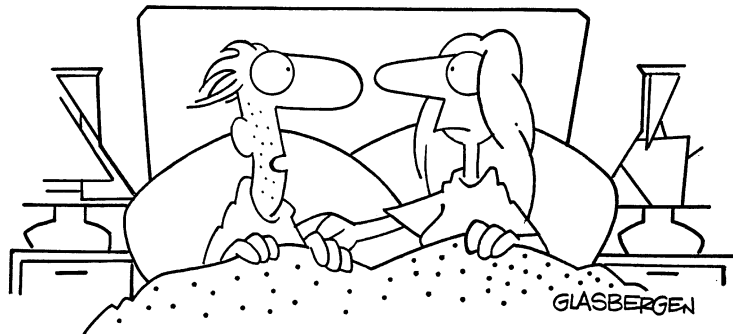
Most preconception discussions between patients and doctors—if they occur at all—are limited to “Begin taking your folic acid, and have fun!” The fact of the matter is, however, that there are many things you can do to improve your physical health and psychological readiness in the critical ninety-day period before conception. In this book we’ll help you to thoroughly assess your emotional, financial, environmental, gynecologic, genetic, nutritional, and physical preparedness and provide detailed advice on how to improve in each area. If you follow our preconception guidelines, you will also improve your odds of

- Conceiving more easily
- Conceiving a healthier baby
- Having a healthier pregnancy
- Recovering more easily in the postpartum period
- Decreasing your child’s risk for certain adult health problems

You may be wondering why certain baby-friendly actions must be implemented in the months *prior to* conception. After all, until fertilization occurs, there isn’t even a baby in the picture. Well, the egg and sperm that will eventually become that baby go through crucial genetic preparations in the weeks *before* conception, and you want these to occur under the best circumstances. Because genetic defects do not all occur randomly, the prospect of having some control over this risk is immensely empowering. Also, consider that most birth defects—many preventable—occur between seventeen and fifty-six days after conception, often before a woman becomes aware that she is pregnant. Preconceptional readiness primes the woman’s body so the baby can thrive in those early weeks of development. Take it from us: it is also a lot easier to continue healthy habits during pregnancy and beyond if you already have them in place before you are pregnant. And eventually your children will learn the healthy habits that you, their parents, model.

We cannot emphasize enough that the preconception actions of *both* partners, not solely the woman, can make a difference in the health of their future child. Ultimate success comes when you both feel equally important and act synergistically as a team. You will find a lot of information in this book to help the prospective dad become healthier, better informed, and more involved in what lies ahead.

We share your enthusiasm for wanting to make your body a safe and healthy place for your baby to thrive.



“Let’s try getting up every night at 2:00 AM to feed the cat. If we enjoy doing that, then we can talk about having a baby.”

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HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF OUR BOOK

Are you planning your pregnancy several months to a year in advance, or have you already started trying? How you use this book largely depends on your personal time frame for conception. As mentioned earlier, we recommend following these guidelines for at least ninety days before trying to conceive. This time frame is ultimately best for all involved in *most* situations, but may not be practical or necessary in *all* situations; we’ll make a point of noting when something should be heeded earlier or later than the ninety-day time line. Depending on what you discover from this book about your current state of preconception readiness, you may come to the conclusion that it is in your interest to postpone your plans for a few months. In the grand scheme of things, a relatively short delay is a small price to pay for improving your odds for a healthier outcome.

We’ve organized this book according to how you might naturally approach preparing for pregnancy. Long before you and your partner discuss preconception readiness with a health care professional, you’ll determine whether you’re mentally and financially ready to welcome a new being into your life. At the same time, you may start looking at your lifestyle habits (e.g., smoking, drinking) and your home and away-from-home environments with questions of wholesomeness and safety in mind. After these initial considerations, we get to the heart of preconception medicine, nutrition, and fitness for women and men. Finally, the last chapter, “Romancing the Egg,” can be referred to when you’re both ready to start “trying.”

Before Your Pregnancy is meant to be an interactive book. We encourage you to write in the blank spaces, margins, and charts. Highlight pertinent advice with a pen or colored marker. Approach this as you would a delectable barbecue dinner: you cannot thoroughly enjoy the meal if you and your napkin remain spotless.

To further encourage you to participate in the learning process we feature exercises

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Although the information in this book is written for couples, we address “you,” the prospective mother, unless stated otherwise. We’re making the assumption that, for the most part, it will be women who read this book and then share pertinent portions with their partner. (Kudos to you men who ran across this book first.)

You will also notice that we use several interchangeable terms throughout the book. For example, the yet-to-be-conceived baby and the baby while in the womb both are referred to either as the fetus or the baby. Your primary health care provider is referred to most of the time as doctor or physician, but could just as easily be nurse midwife, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant. Finally, we use the terms partner, husband, wife, baby’s mother/father, mate, or spouse interchangeably.

called *Practical Applications*. As the term suggests, these typically take the topic under discussion into your own specific circumstances. For example, in the section on women’s medical issues, one *Practical Application* is to look in your medicine cabinet and write down all the medications, herbs, and supplements you find, familiarize yourself with what we recommend about them, and note which ones you should ask your physician about.

Some of the recommendations for pre-pregnancy are also applicable later on, often for completely different reasons. When that is the case, you will see boxes titled *For Future Reference* with symbols such as ♀ when the reference is to pregnancy, 👶 when the reference is to infant care, and 👨‍👩‍👧 for family life with children. These are for all of you information packets to tuck in the back of your minds for future use during the pregnancy and postpartum period. If you are the type who was driven crazy in school by a teacher who periodically went off on tangents, feel free to ignore these little factoids!

This book will also help you become a more active participant in your health care. It will assist you in organizing any questions you may have for your doctor and help to clarify what he or she is telling you. That way you can make the best use of your appointment time and will be less likely to walk out of the office saying, “Oh, I wish I had asked her about x, y, and z.”

SETTING A NEW PRECEDENT

As you put our guidelines into action remember that the practice of preconception care is much newer than the well-established practice of prenatal (during pregnancy) care—so new, in fact, that you may periodically be faced with skepticism from your family, friends, and even some health care workers. Your partner may question the necessity of it. Don’t be

swayed or discouraged if people say that couples have been having healthy babies for hundreds of thousands of years, and very few of them did anything to plan ahead for conception. Or if they point out that there are women who abuse their body with drugs and an unhealthy lifestyle and then have healthy babies despite it all. It's true that women give birth to healthy babies under less than ideal circumstances—thank goodness for this general resiliency! Even so, preconception planning *does* improve one's overall odds for giving a baby a head start from the very moment of conception. The particulars of how and how much it helps will vary among individuals.

Occasionally we encounter a prospective parent who finds the thought of planning for pregnancy unappealing because of religious or cultural beliefs. Or you and your partner may prefer to be spontaneous and just see what happens. However, the words “planning” and “spontaneity” are not diametrically opposed. Although some couples will meticulously plan to “start trying,” *true preconception readiness is a lifestyle practice in case pregnancy should occur*. Considering that almost half of all pregnancies are unplanned, this type of general pre-pregnancy readiness is a good idea for any couple of childbearing age. Following these guidelines will mean that you and your partner will be optimally ready to create a baby at any time, whether you intend to become pregnant or not.

Over the course of our careers we have counseled thousands of couples who, like you, are planning to start trying to get pregnant. Their experiences have inspired the many scenarios we have created to illustrate the information in this book. In addition, many experts outside our respective fields—psychologists, social workers, financial planners, public health advocates, geneticists, urologists/male infertility specialists, and herbal researchers—have generously shared their knowledge with us to make this book as complete a resource as possible. We extend our gratitude to all who have contributed to our understanding of what it means to want a child and to selflessly act in his or her favor before conception. We thank you, too, for caring enough to learn, as we have.

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