Pregnancy Awareness Week
12 to 16 February 2019
Pregnancy Awareness Week comes with a very important purpose: to reduce the number of deaths or complications that arise due to pregnancy. By using information as a tool to educate, we are able to highlight important issues that promote a healthy pregnancy and safe journey into motherhood.

One of the best ways to prepare for motherhood is to join the GEMS Maternity programme. Government suggest that women begin attending ante natal care as soon as they confirm they’re pregnant. There are boundless benefits to ante natal care.

› Free testing for HIV
› Voluntary counselling for women with HIV
› Opportunities to treat existing conditions that can be complicated by pregnancy, including: diabetes, hypertension, anaemia and a number of infections
› Education on warning signs of complications
› Preparation for birth and motherhood
› Preparation for any potential complications
› Introduction of proper self-care during and after pregnancy
› Assistance for fathers and their role in the pregnancy, birth and fatherhood
› What to expect from labour and birth

Many women go into pregnancy without knowing what their rights are as patients and as women. Pregnancy Awareness Week also places a large emphasis on ensuring that women are equipped with all the knowledge relating to the following:

› Women have the right to choose their companion for pregnancy and childbirth, as well as who will join them during their antenatal classes
› Women have the right to be treated with respect and dignity
› They have the right to complete confidentiality
› Women have the right to ask question and get a proper understanding of their conditions and their baby’s conditions

Sharing tips on how to enjoy a healthy pregnancy and how to prevent complications are the main goal of Pregnancy Awareness Week. We are all encouraged to help spread awareness via our networks and social channels.

**Pregnancy Awareness Campaign 2019**

Pregnancy Awareness Week 2019 is focusing on the following:

› Pregnancy planning and Reproductive Health Wellbeing for Women
› Reproductive Wellbeing for Men

**Pregnancy planning and Reproductive Health Wellbeing for Women**

**Pregnancy planning**

Often babies are unplanned, but when ready to have a baby, planning is one of the most important things to do. It’s never too early to become healthy and well enough to have a baby.

One of the foremost things to do is maintain a healthy state of being before, during and after pregnancy. This will be the secret weapon in coping with the whole process. Avoiding harmful substances and communication with a healthcare provider about plans is key. Eating well and exercising regularly are definitely going to be positive contributing factors to a healthy pregnancy, but here are some other tips.
Take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day
Folic acid is a B vitamin that can help prevent major birth defects of the developing brain and spine. It is gained from fortified foods and supplements, but supplementation is highly recommended because if a woman has enough folic acid in her body at least one month before and during pregnancy, the benefits will be recognised.

Book regular time with a healthcare professional
A healthcare provider should be involved with a woman’s pregnancy from the beginning or as soon as possible. Seeing a doctor regularly will ensure that both mother and baby are healthy and that any tests required are carried out at the right time.

When planning a pregnancy, regular visits and medical check-ups with a healthcare provider are recommended. Preconception healthcare should be discussed as well as what medications can be of benefit for mother-to-be as well as baby.

Committing to a healthy lifestyle
Drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking and using any harmful substances can prevent a woman falling pregnant, but it can also lead to complications during pregnancy. Leading a stressful lifestyle is also damaging to mother and baby, as is living in an abusive environment. Counselling, treatment and support can be offered by a healthcare provider in order to ensure that expectant mother is in as healthy environment as possible.

Avoid alcohol during pregnancy
Alcohol in any quantity can be harmful to a pregnant woman, and it can also prevent pregnancy taking place. It is transmitted directly to the baby through the umbilical cord. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, and a range of lifelong physical, and behavioural disabilities. Disabilities in the baby, which occur as a result of drinking alcohol during pregnancy, are known as foetal alcohol syndrome. There are no known safe amounts and no known safe varieties of alcohol, so it is best to avoid alcohol altogether.

Avoid smoking during pregnancy
Direct smoking and second-hand smoke are both harmful for a pregnant woman and can put her and her baby at risk. Dangers include low birth weight, preterm birth, birth defects such as cleft lip and cleft palate, and also infant death. Quitting smoking before falling pregnant is the best choice, or at least upon finding out about a pregnancy.

Avoid marijuana and other drugs during pregnancy
Smoking marijuana or taking other drugs before or during pregnancy will have similar effects as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. Baby can be born with a low birth weight, preterm, or with other health problems or defects. Marijuana is the most commonly used drug during pregnancy, but there are no safe levels of marijuana use that are known. It is best to avoid use of it, even if it is being used medicinally. There is no safe level of use for other drugs either.

Keep diabetes under control
Keeping diabetes under control during pregnancy will reduce chances of birth defects and other complications. Proper exercise, healthy nutrition consisting of whole foods, and proper monitoring by a health practitioner will help prevent negative outcomes.

Maintain a healthy weight
Pregnancy is not an excuse to put on weight over and above what is naturally expected due to the growth of baby. A woman who is obese before pregnancy will be more at risk for complications. Getting healthy and losing weight will improve health and mindset, which is great for women who want
to fall pregnant and is advised before choosing to try and fall pregnant.

**Maintain positive mental health**
Practicing self-love and ensuring that the mind is stable are both a good start for women who want to fall pregnant. Being strong of mind will go a long way to guaranteeing that pregnancy is easier to manage. It’s important for women who battle with self-esteem, anxiety, depression and poor self-worth to seek help from their healthcare providers before falling pregnant or upon finding out.

**Preventative screening tests**
Women can receive a range of preventative screening tests and vaccinations prior to pregnancy to prevent certain infections. There are some infections that can cause birth defects. GEMS provides adequate preventative screening tests to make sure that women go into their pregnancies in a healthy state and with peace of mind.

Vaccinations such as the flu vaccine are safe to have during pregnancy. Pregnant women with flu also have an increased risk of serious problems for their pregnancy, including preterm birth.

**Reproductive Wellbeing for Men**
People tend to think that preconception health refers only to women, but men can also pay close attention to their health and wellbeing in order to conceive. They can also go to great lengths to support the women in their lives.

**Plan for pregnancy accordingly**
Planning your family prior to pregnancy will help both man and woman move into the stages of pregnancy with values, goals and resources on hand. This is known as a reproductive life plan and offers opportunity for action.

**Prevent and treat sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**
Men can have the appropriate screenings for STDs prior to trying for pregnancy to ensure that they will not be bringing these complications into pregnancy. Syphilis, Chlamydia/Gonorrhoea screenings are offered on all scheme options. Consequences can be serious for both woman and baby if mother or father is carrying an STD. These consequences can even be life threatening. Where men are concerned, some STDs can even cause fertility issues, which will prevent pregnancy from occurring.

**Stop smoking, drinking and using drugs**
Not only is smoking, drinking and using drugs harmful to a person’s health, but it can create a negative environment for mother and baby. Second-hand smoke can cause problems and even early death in children. A pregnant woman exposed to second-hand smoke also has a higher chance of giving birth to a baby with complications, such as low birth weight, or even having a preterm birth.

**Avoid toxic substances**
Exposure to toxic substances at work or at home can be dangerous to a pregnant woman or baby. Substances such as synthetic chemicals, fertilisers, bug sprays, cat faeces, or rodent faeces, poisons etc. can be harmful to the reproductive systems of both men and women. Small amounts can lead to diseases. It’s important to steer clear of these substances wherever possible and to wash hands regularly after exposure.

**Prevent infertility**
Infertility can be genetic or due to certain circumstances. Health and lifestyle can also have an effect on sperm counts, as can the following:

- Type 1 diabetes
- Heavy alcohol use
Use of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine and anabolic steroids

Smoking cigarettes

Age

Obesity

Exposure to hazardous substances, including bug spray and metals, such as lead

Diseases such as mumps, serious conditions like kidney disease, or hormone problems

Medicines (prescription, non-prescription, and herbal products)

Radiation treatment and chemotherapy for cancer

If in any doubt, a man should contact his healthcare professional to discuss any matters relating to infertility and the reasons behind it.

Maintain a healthy weight

Overweight people are at a higher risk for conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and a range of cancers. Obesity can lead to infertility and poor self-esteem. Men who are underweight are also at risk for health problems. Maintaining a healthy weight comes down to nutritious eating, exercise and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, all of which are important for a father-to-be and his family.

Say no to violence

Violence of any sort should not be tolerated and should be reported. A man should stand up for his family if any acts of violence are committed. A violent father must understand the implications of his acts and how they negatively affect the mother and baby. A violent man can make a choice to stop using violence, by consulting a healthcare professional that will help get to the root of his actions.

Maintain good mental health

How men think, feel and cope with life can be attributed to mental wellbeing. Being mentally healthy is as important as being physically healthy. Feelings of anxiety, worry and sadness are common, especially when going through pregnancy for the first time. Consulting a healthcare professional to help with mental stability is vital as it will help the whole family.

Support the mother of your child

Men are encouraged to support their partners through pregnancy as it is a large undertaking for any family. Choosing to exercise together and eat healthily together are examples of good support, but so is reminding your partner to take medication, to rest and to follow a proper pregnancy treatment plan.

Conclusion

Being armed with the right information will help families navigate pregnancy together. It will also help prevent negative circumstances taking place during what should be a joyous time in a family’s life.

References


If you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact your Wellbeing Programme Support team on:

Phone: 0860 00 4367. Email: enquiries@gems.gov.za
Visit: www.gems.gov.za