

## PREVENTION

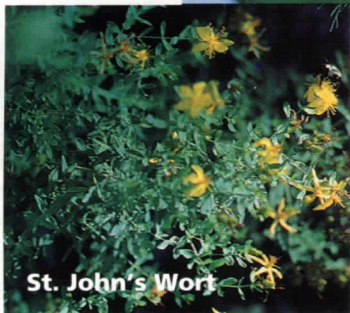
# Good for What Ails You?

You see them everywhere...on the news, in magazine ads, and lining the drugstore shelves. Herbal supplements promise to do it all, from improving your mood to boosting your energy to preventing cancer. Are they really all they're cracked up to be? And, more important, are they safe?

Here's a closer look at three of the most popular supplements available today. Remember: herbs may not be created in a laboratory, but they still contain active ingredients, which makes them

drugs. Consider their use as seriously as you would any medication, and consult with your doctor beforehand.

**Battle the blues!** While St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) has been touted as the herbal answer to Prozac, much is still unknown about this over-the-counter remedy. Multiple studies have shown the herb is effective in treating moderate depression, with fewer side effects than prescription antidepressants. Researchers believe the key is hypericin, a plant compound that may regulate brain chemicals responsible for mood, such as serotonin and monoamine oxidase. Possible



St. John's Wort



Ginkgo Biloba

side effects include photosensitivity, abdominal pain, bloating, nausea, and fatigue.

### Refresh your memory!

In Europe, ginkgo biloba is prescribed

to treat a host of problems, including Alzheimer's disease, poor circulation, heart attack, and stroke. In the United States, researchers found the herb safe and effective in treating memory disorders that could lead to Alzheimer's disease. If you are taking blood thinners, don't try ginkgo without consulting your doctor. He may adjust your blood thinner dosage or advise you against trying the herb.

**Improve prostate health!** In numerous clinical studies, saw palmetto has shown considerable promise in reducing the signs and symptoms of benign enlargement of the prostate gland, known medically as benign

## Keep in Mind

- ◆ Don't self-diagnose. Explain your symptoms to your doctor and let her treat you with conventional drugs first. If you experience unwanted side effects, talk with your doctor about herbal alternatives.
- ◆ Talk openly with your doctor about any herbs you're taking. She can give you sound advice based on your medical history.
- ◆ If you're taking any prescription medications, consult your doctor before taking any herbal supplement. Many interact with other drugs, sometimes dangerously.
- ◆ Remember: Supplements are not regulated by the FDA. Once an herb is on the market, the FDA has to prove it is unsafe before it can restrict its use.
- ◆ Avoid herbal supplements if you're pregnant or nursing.
- ◆ Buy brand-name supplements made in the United States to ensure product purity.
- ◆ Look for the word "standardized" on any product you're considering.

— J.M.

PHOTOS: ENZYMATIC THERAPY

## NEWS FROM THE FIELD

### Whole Grains Cut Women's Cancer Risk

Make your next slice of toast whole wheat. University of Minnesota researchers analyzed data from the Iowa Women's Health Study of more than 38,000 women, and observed that women who ate at least one serving of whole grains per day reduced their risk of dying from cancer and cardiovascular disease by 15 percent.

### Talk and Rx For Depression

A combination of drugs and "talk therapy" appears to be the most effective means of preventing bouts of recurrent depression in the elderly. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh studied 107 patients age sixty and older and found that patients who received monthly psychotherapy plus an anti-depressant had significantly lower rates of recurrent depression over a three-year period.

prostatic hyperplasia (BPH). Saw palmetto appears to be completely safe, with no ill side effects reported in any of the clinical trials conducted. However, before you shop, remember that prostate disorders can only be diagnosed by a physician. If you have symptoms of BPH, or prostate cancer, see your doctor immediately.

— Janice McMillan

*HealthCare Directions magazine is part of a multi-media health education initiative. The HealthCare Directions television show, a production of Broadcast Marketing Services, Inc., is broadcast regularly on network and cable television stations. The HealthCare Directions Web page can be accessed at [www.bcbstri.com](http://www.bcbstri.com).*

# Baby **STEPS**

Preparing body and soul for the experience of a lifetime

So you think you're ready to have a baby.

You've made a list of names, chosen a theme for the nursery and had your car seat designed by Cadillac. But is your body ready for the demands of pregnancy? Do you have the information you need to ensure your baby has the best start possible? Advance planning enables you to make decisions that benefit you and your baby. Taking special care of yourself — before and during your pregnancy — can significantly improve your chances of having a healthy baby.

## Team Up With an Expert

If you haven't chosen an obstetrician or midwife, now is a good time to select one. Contact your health plan or talk to trusted friends and family members for recommendations. Once you've narrowed down your choices, schedule interviews and ask questions to be sure you select a caregiver you are comfortable with. Before you make your final decision, remember to ask about their hospital affiliations.

Once you have chosen your doctor,

By Janice McMillan  
Photography by Chris Vaccaro

Portsmouth resident Jenny Swider has always considered herself an athlete, from her days as a college basketball player right through her pregnancy. Swider made a point of walking every day of her term. She delivered a healthy baby boy in May.



MAKE-UP/HAIR: JESSICA HICKEY; CLOTHING: A PEA IN THE POD, THE VILLAGE AT GARDEN CITY

Walking is one of the easiest forms of exercise and costs nothing. All you need is comfortable walking shoes and you're on your way!



schedule a visit at least six months before you plan to conceive. He or she will take a complete medical and genetic history to identify potential risks and any need for genetic testing. Be open and honest with your doctor about your lifestyle, including alcohol and drug use, diet, exercise and any prescription medications you are taking. Make sure your vaccinations are up to date.

Discuss your work environment with your doctor to determine if any aspect of your job could affect your ability to get pregnant or pose a threat to your unborn child. Take measures to reduce stress and avoid on the job hazards.

### Kick the Habit

It takes time and patience to quit a habit. But if you're considering pregnancy, you've never had better incentive. Making the following lifestyle changes now can save your baby from serious harm, even death.

*Quit smoking.* Every cigarette you smoke delivers carbon monoxide and nicotine to your unborn child. Smoking can lead to premature delivery, low birth weight and may be associated with frequent colds, ear infections and lung disease after birth. Second hand smoke can have the same harmful effects.

*Eliminate alcohol.* Even moderate alcohol use can have serious consequences for the fetus, including brain and organ damage. Alcohol abuse can also lead to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), which has been linked to mental retardation, physical defects and

learning disabilities.

*Don't take illegal drugs.* Drugs like cocaine, crack, heroin and marijuana are a danger to you and devastating to your baby. Drug abuse can lead to heavy bleeding, preterm birth and miscarriage. And if you're addicted, chances are your baby is addicted, and may be born into the pain of withdrawal.

Protect yourself and your baby and seek help to break unhealthy habits now. And remember, if you are planning to breastfeed your baby, alcohol, drugs and the harmful chemicals in cigarettes can be transmitted through breast milk.

### Eating for Two?

Not really. A pregnant woman needs between 2,100 and 2,500 calories — that's only 300 more calories than a non-pregnant woman requires. It's how you get those calories that counts, and a healthy diet assures that you get the nutrients you both need.

First, get enough folic acid — also known as vitamin B9. Only 400 mcg daily may prevent neural tube defects such as spina bifida and anencephaly. A multivitamin contains the recommended dosage of B9, or you may prefer to get yours by eating plenty of leafy, dark-green vegetables, citrus fruits, and beans. Breakfast cereals are also fortified with folate.

Next, make a grocery list. Include foods rich in protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and fiber. Your diet should include six or more servings of breads and grains per day, two to four servings of fruits and three to five servings of veggies. Top that off with two to three servings of protein from chicken, fish, beans, nuts or tofu. And wash it all down with six to eight glasses of water each day.

Finally, don't forget the calcium! You'll need three to four servings of calcium-rich foods each day to ensure your baby's bones and teeth are strong and healthy. Milk, hard cheese, cottage cheese, yogurt and ice cream are excellent sources of calcium. If you're lactose intolerant, don't worry. Foods such as broccoli, kale, cabbage, sesame seeds and peanuts — and drinks like fortified orange juice — are also rich in this bone-building mineral. If necessary,

### Education Express

Visit these Web sites for information on prenatal care, childbirth and childcare:

- [www.parentsoup.com](http://www.parentsoup.com) — information on all aspects of parenthood
- [www.modimes.org](http://www.modimes.org) — information about the March of Dimes and a searchable data base
- [www.pregnancytoday.com](http://www.pregnancytoday.com) — includes interactive forums and frequently asked questions

Call Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and BlueCHiP when you become pregnant to join the Little Steps Program! You'll receive lots of free information, including a book called *Baby & Me, The Essential Guide to Pregnancy*.

your doctor may even recommend supplements.

What about the fun stuff? Don't feel guilty about those occasional indulgences. Sharing a banana split with a friend can be just as healthy for the soul as that broccoli is for your heart. Just remember — everything in moderation!

### Work Smarter, Not Harder

If you're not exercising already — get moving! Ideally, you should be in shape and follow a regular routine before you become pregnant. Strengthening your body prepares you for the rigors of pregnancy and delivery, and helps speed recovery after birth. Exercise also relaxes your mind, can prevent or reduce backache, strengthens your immune system and increases blood flow, which can prevent leg swelling. Work with your doctor to develop a pre-pregnancy exercise routine that you can modify throughout your pregnancy.

Walking is one of the easiest and costs nothing. All you need is comfortable walking shoes and you're on your way! Walk for about a half-hour each day, increasing the pace and duration as your fitness level improves. Include a 5-10 minute warmup and at least a 10-minute cooldown each time you exercise.

Other safe bets include swimming, low-impact aerobics and yoga. Stay within your target heart-rate range and, once you're pregnant, avoid exercising on your back after the first trimester; exercises in which you could lose your balance; overheating and fatigue.

### The Stick Turned Pink!

Now that you're pregnant, get ready for some changes! Here's what you can expect in the months ahead:

*Weighing in.* The recommended weight-gain range is 25-35 pounds. Where does it all go? Seven pounds is stored as fat, protein and other nutrients; add ten pounds for increased blood and fluid levels; breast growth and the uterus account for two pounds each; the placenta accounts for one and a half pounds; and then there's baby, at about seven and a half pounds. Your doctor will recommend the ideal weight gain for you.

*Pass the crackers, please.* Though not all women experience morning sickness, some feel nauseous throughout the first trimester. To combat that queasy feeling, eat dry crackers before getting out of bed in the morning. Eat several small meals throughout the day rather than three large meals and avoid greasy or spicy foods. Consult your doctor if nausea and vomiting are excessive.

*Ankles away!* Swollen ankles and

feet are fairly common during pregnancy. For relief, elevate your legs often, wear comfortable shoes and support pantyhose, get up and move around frequently, and cut back on salt. Drink more water to stimulate efficient kidney function.

*Butterfly kisses.* As your baby grows, you'll experience increased fetal movement. At first it's a barely noticeable flutter, like butterflies in your belly. Before long, you'll be convinced your bundle of joy is kicking field goals in there!

### The Wonder of it All

Pregnancy is no longer the passive 'illness' of your grandmother's day. Take an active role in every aspect of this experience — from the dream of pre-conception to the real joy and wonder when your newborn is placed in your arms. Enjoy! Oh, and remember...get some sleep! ■

## Blue Cross & Blue Shield Prenatal Care Guidelines

Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and BlueCHiP have adopted the following prenatal care guidelines from the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) Expert Panel on prenatal care:

- When you become pregnant, schedule a prenatal visit with your obstetrician or midwife.
- Keep all of your appointments; if you have to cancel a visit, be sure to reschedule.
- Expect a complete physical on your first visit, including blood pressure, pulse, height, weight, pelvic and breast exams.
- At every visit, your health care provider will examine your belly to monitor the baby's growth; you'll also be able to hear the baby's heartbeat.
- Ask your doctor about child-birth and parenting, family roles, breast-feeding, baby care and safety issues such as seat belt use and car seats.
- He or she will order lab tests to make sure you are as healthy as you can be.
- If you smoke, talk to your doctor about how to quit; don't drink alcohol or take illegal drugs.
- Your doctor may recommend a flu shot in your second or third trimester. If you have medical problems, such as asthma, that could get worse with the flu, he or she may recommend the vaccine anytime during pregnancy.
- All women are offered screening for risk factors such as Down Syndrome and neural tube defects. High-risk women — age 35 or older, and those with a history of having an infant with Down syndrome — will be offered in-depth diagnostic testing.