You may know that eating right and taking care of yourself is important for the health of your unborn child. But did you know that your health can impact your child long before you even know you’re pregnant?

Neural tube defects, which cause defects of the brain, skull or spine, usually occur in the earliest stages of embryo development. Studies have shown that women who get 400 micrograms of folic acid daily, beginning before they get pregnant, reduce their risk for these kinds of birth defects.

Each year, more than 10% of the babies born in New Hampshire are born prematurely (before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy). These babies are at greater risk for newborn health complications and disabilities such as mental retardation, cerebral palsy, lung and gastrointestinal problems, vision and hearing loss. While the causes of premature birth are not fully understood, certain lifestyle factors and medical conditions can put you at greater risk of delivering too early:

• Smoking
• Drinking alcohol
• Drug use
• Domestic violence
• Late or no prenatal care
• Extremely high levels of stress
• Obesity
• High blood pressure
• Diabetes
• Infections
• Long working hours with long periods of standing

It’s important to note that smoking while pregnant prevents your unborn child from receiving enough oxygen. This can cause your baby to grow more slowly and gain less weight in the womb. It has also been linked to preterm labor and other complications. Alcohol and drug use during pregnancy can cause both physical and mental birth defects. If you have trouble saying no to alcohol, drugs or smoking, it’s important to talk to your doctor right away for advice.

It’s natural to feel stressed during your pregnancy. Very high levels of stress, however, may contribute to low birth weight or preterm labor. Recognizing your stress is the first step to managing it. There are many steps you can take to reduce stress:

• Eat healthy and regularly
• Drink plenty of water
• Rest whenever you can
• Exercise (talk to your doctor before beginning an exercise program)
• Relax through meditation or listening to music
• Avoid stressful situations
• Talk to someone when you feel overwhelmed
• Don’t miss any prenatal appointment. This will help ease your mind that your baby is doing well.

To learn more about a healthy diet during pregnancy, talk with your physician or call Elliot Nutrition Services at 663-DIET. Your physician can also provide more information about preterm labor and birth, or visit the March of Dimes website at www.marchofdimes.com.

Adding Folic Acid to Your Diet is Easy!

• Fortified breakfast cereals
• Lentils
• Asparagus
• Spinach
• Black beans
• Peanuts (if you don’t have an allergy)
• Orange juice
• Enriched breads and pasta
• Romaine lettuce

Always check the nutrition labels on products to ensure you’re getting enough folic acid in your diet.

Source: March of Dimes