

Women's health: Form a healthy future early, from exercise to reproductive issues.



Dr. Elise Schroeder checks 18-year-old Maggie Boyd's tonsils during Boyd's first consultation at the Blossom Clinic in NE Portland. Schroeder says it is important for women under 30 to take care of their bodies and keep an eye on their health in order to benefit themselves later in life. *(Molly J. Smith, The Oregonian)*



By [Kelly House, The Oregonian](#)

on June 19, 2013 at 8:26 AM, updated June 20, 2013 at 7:07 AM

Your 20s, society often tells you, are the best years of your life. The future is yours to mold and you've still got the vitality of youth.

But, says Elise Schroeder, director of the [National College of Natural Medicine's Women in Balance Institute](#), that doesn't mean you should carry on eating hot dogs, staying up late, attending daily happy hours and skipping exercise in favor of said happy hours.

"Not enough attention is being paid to women in their 20s and their health issues," Schroeder says.

Whether children are in your plans or not, reproductive health should rise to the top of your health concerns at this age, experts say. These are the most fertile years of your life; the average American woman has her first child at age 25.

About [half of American pregnancies are unintentional](#), a recent study showed. As a result, doctors are placing increased emphasis on reproductive issues.

"We're trying to get doctors to ask patients, 'Do you want to become pregnant in the next year?'" says Michelle Berlin, co-director of [Oregon Health & Science University's Center for Women's Health](#).

Their answer will determine the treatment doctors provide. Women who want to get pregnant should be taking folic acid to decrease the risk of bearing a child with spina bifida and other birth defects. Those who don't want to become pregnant should prioritize birth control to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

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"Choose the right form, and use it consistently and correctly," Schroeder says. "I talk about that with every one of my patients."

Schroeder also recommends a high-quality daily multivitamin to supplement any nutrients lacking in your diet. If you do get pregnant, intentionally or unintentionally, your baby will benefit from having an already healthy mom. For women not planning on pregnancy, vitamins will help boost vitamin B levels depleted by the birth control pill.

The 20s are also a time when women tend to have the highest number of sexual partners, a fact that makes regular gynecological exams a must. Sexually active women who aren't in a steady relationship should undergo yearly chlamydia screenings, Berlin says. All women between the ages of 21 and 29 should get a Pap smear every three years, she says.

Women whose pap smear reveals abnormalities should ask their doctor whether testing for [human papillomavirus](#), or HPV, is appropriate.

The [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's](#) website includes a handy tool to help you identify your reproductive health needs based upon age, gender, sexual activity and other factors.

Schroeder also suggests taking probiotic supplements or eating cultured foods such as miso, yogurt, and kimchi, particularly for women who have recently taken antibiotics. The sudden dip in bodily microbes makes women vulnerable to yeast infections.

Aside from paying attention to reproductive health, the best move you can make at this life stage is to take care of yourself before biology begins working against you. See the adjacent box for a list of overall health tips for women under 30.

-- Kelly House