

Your 20s: Work now to ensure long, healthy life in the future

By **KELLY HOUSE**
THE OREGONIAN

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.

"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 papillomavi-

rus, 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. It's available at <http://epss.ahrq.gov>.

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.

Other top tips for women in their 20s

Eat healthy. Eat regularly. Women in this age group tend to skip meals more often than others, Schroeder says. That leaves them at risk for a number of health implications, particularly anxiety.

"The main hormone that compensates when we don't eat a meal is our stress hormone, cortisol," Schroeder says. "Plus, you're setting yourself up for problems with metabolism later."

If you smoke, stop now. Studies have shown women who quit by age 30 nearly erase the risk of untimely death. Those who continue smoking are at risk for a laundry list of health problems, from lung cancer to emphysema to cardiovascular disease.

Get eight hours of nightly shuteye. Before your 30s, you can get away with a sleepless night here and there without feeling useless the next day. But those sleepless nights add up, and can lead to problems from delayed reaction time to high blood pressure and eventual heart problems.

Exercise regularly. Again, this is preventative medicine. Your metabolism might still be swift enough that you can get by without exercising and still look good. But it's not all about vanity. Beginning a healthy lifestyle regimen now is training your muscles for later in life, when it's harder to start from scratch. Not to mention the mental health benefits of regular physical activity, which have been shown to be as effective as antidepressants.

— Kelly House