Am I Pregnant?

Carrie called MotherToBaby on a Monday morning. She sounded anxious. “I just got home from a pretty wild bachelorette party held last week in New Orleans. I started feeling nauseous on the plane and I have thrown up twice this morning. I couldn’t eat breakfast. I’m really tired and my breasts hurt a little. I’m worried I might be pregnant.” Carrie was wondering if we could help her figure out if she was pregnant or not. Although MotherToBaby mainly answers questions about medications and other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding, the “am I pregnant” question is one we hear often.

This call reminded me of another one that I received several weeks prior – Anya called to say that she was two days late for her period, but she hadn’t been able to take a pregnancy test just yet. She was taking birth control pills and had missed one day but took two pills the next day, just like her doctor had told her to do if that happened. She was hoping she wasn’t pregnant, but she was worried that taking the birth control pills may have increased the chance for a birth defect in her baby if she was pregnant.

January is National Birth Defects Awareness Month, and a great time for those planning a pregnancy to review their own risk for having a child with a birth defect. Over half of all pregnancies in this country are unplanned. Talk with one of our specialists. Together with MotherToBaby, you can consider your own risk in a thorough discussion. Also see this link to the CDC page on birth defects prevention.

Back to our callers’ situations. There are many signs of early pregnancy and they may be different from person to person. Yet there can be other reasons a person might have any of these symptoms, which is why it’s important to perform a pregnancy test. The following symptoms could be side effects from hormonal contraception OR early signs of illness OR your period is about to start OR actually signs of pregnancy. These include light vaginal bleeding or spotting, mild uterine cramping, sore or swollen breasts, feeling tired, feeling bloated, feeling moody, urinating more often than usual, food aversions, nausea or vomiting, constipation, stuffy or runny nose. Even a missed period might not mean you are pregnant.

If you think you may be pregnant, the best way to know for sure is to take a pregnancy test. Home pregnancy tests, sold at grocery stores, pharmacies and drugstores, are about 90% accurate on the day you are supposed to have your period. If you wait just one more week, the tests are reported to be about 97-99% accurate. Taking a test sooner than the day your period is supposed to start can lead to false negative results. How? Pregnancy tests measure a hormone called human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) in your urine and your body only makes this hormone if you’re pregnant. Your body makes more hCG as time passes though, and your test could be negative if there isn’t enough hCG to measure in your urine yet. Home urine pregnancy tests are just as accurate as the urine tests at the doctor’s office when they are used correctly and at the right time in your menstrual cycle. Before you begin, make sure to check the expiration date on the outside of the box. Carefully read the instructions. If you still aren’t sure about the result, visit a clinic to be tested again.

While a woman waits until the day she can take a pregnancy test, meaning until she knows for certain whether or not she is pregnant, it’s important to avoid alcohol, smoking, and drugs. All of these substances can be harmful to a pregnancy and to a developing baby. MotherToBaby is an excellent resource for discussing these exposures during pregnancy, plus for any medications you might be taking. This conversation can be useful in making decisions with your doctor about continuing or stopping a medication. In some cases, it may actually be better to continue taking certain medicines, for both your own health and the baby’s well-being. Don’t stop your medications until you speak with your doctor or pharmacist.

If your period has not started within a week after a negative result, you should take another pregnancy test. If it's still negative, make an appointment with your healthcare professional to determine what may be going on. You might be stressed, be exercising too much, getting sick or experiencing hormonal imbalances. All of these should be discussed with a doctor. If you are not pregnant, it's also an excellent time to discuss short-term birth control or long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) like IUDs or birth control implants. No contraceptive method is 100% effective, and I've spoken with people who became pregnant even with LARC, but the chance of an unplanned pregnancy is far less with correct use of contraception with every sexual act. It's also a good idea to start tracking your periods to learn more about your body and to know when to expect your period. Check out your app store for free apps like: Flo, Clue Period & Cycle Tracker, or Ovia Fertility & Cycle Tracker.

If your home pregnancy test is positive, make an appointment with your healthcare provider. The sooner your pregnancy is confirmed, the sooner you can begin prenatal care. Either before or when you suspect a pregnancy, begin taking a daily prenatal vitamin with at least 400mcg of folic acid. These help support the baby's growth and development and are an important supplement to a good nutritious diet. Check to see if you are up to date on all recommended vaccines. Get some exercise, plenty of sleep, and pay attention to your mental health. See our healthy pregnancy blog post for more details. MotherToBaby is here to help with any questions you have throughout pregnancy and while breastfeeding.

Disclaimer: MotherToBaby Fact Sheets are meant for general information purposes and should not replace the advice of your health care provider. MotherToBaby is a service of the non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS). Copyright by OTIS, January 4, 2022.