

# Women's Health Toolkit



## INTRODUCTION

Women's health needs change throughout life from the early years of puberty to the entering of motherhood, and the transition through menopause. Each stage brings unique challenges, choices, and opportunities.

This toolkit is designed to support women through every phase, exploring key topics and offering strategies to improve the health and well-being of women and girls.

**In this toolkit, we will cover the following topics:**

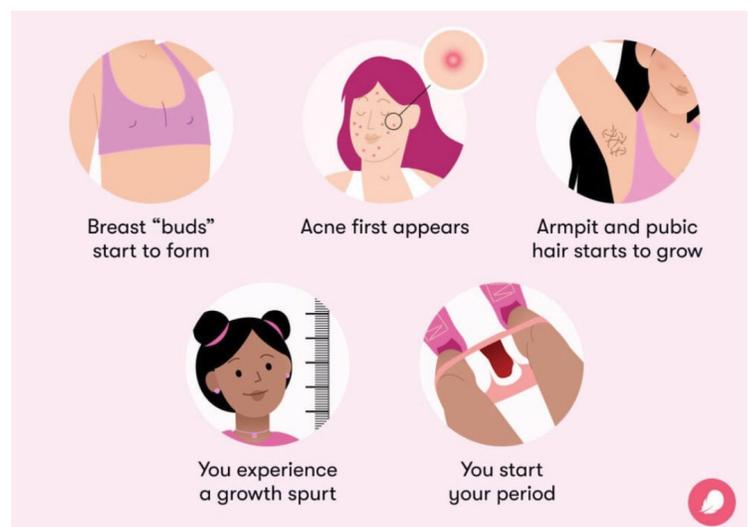
- Puberty and Teenage Health
- Supporting Maternal Health: From Pregnancy to Parenthood Within the First Year of Your Child's Life
  - Military Families and Motherhood
- Understanding the Transition to Perimenopause/Menopause
- Important Health Screenings at Each Stage of Life
- Ways to Protect Your Personal Safety
- Smoking/Vaping Cessation
- Depression – Caring for Your Mental Health at All Ages
- Support and Helpful Resources

*To learn more about any of these topics, talk to your healthcare provider!*

## SECTION I

### Puberty and Teenage Health

Puberty is a key developmental milestone for girls typically between the ages of 8 and 13 years old. It is a time when the body goes through major changes, such as developing breasts and body hair. It is also when girls experience their first menstruation cycle – also known as your “period”.



## Understanding the Menstrual Cycle:

### What to Expect

The menstrual cycle is a natural monthly process where the body sheds the lining of the uterus and leads to bleeding through the vagina — this is called a period. Most girls get their first period within 2-3 years after the development of breast buds.

### Helpful Tips:

- ✓ **Keep good hygiene:** Change pads or tampons regularly and wash with plain water to prevent irritation
- ✓ **Track your cycle:** Tracking your cycle and noticing any unusual changes—like heavy bleeding or strong odors—can help you stay healthy and know when to see a doctor

- ✓ **Take care of your menstrual cramps:**

Menstrual cramps are typically felt in the lower belly, back or pelvis. They start during the first day or two of a period cycle. Using a heating pad on the lower abdomen can help ease the pain. *Talk with your provider to discuss other pain management tools if needed.*



## Emotional & Social Changes

Puberty is a time of both physical and emotional changes. Hormones change as puberty begins. During these developmental milestones, girls may be worried about these changes and how they look in front of their peers.

Some examples of emotional and social changes during this time can include:

- **Heightened concern about body image and looks**
- **Moodiness and less affection towards parents**
- **Caring more about what your peers think**
- **Developing more independence**
- **Experiencing general sadness or depression**
  - If you're experiencing these feelings or have other concerns about your emotional or mental health, please consider talking with a trusted adult and your primary care provider who can assist in assessing your needs and helping you get the care you need
  - **If you are having thoughts of suicide or of harming yourself or others in any way:**
    - **Talk to a friend, family member, or health professional**
    - **Call or text 988, or**
    - **Text TALK to 741741**
  - Please also see page 10 for more about depression



It is important to engage in activities that make you feel your best, especially when going through certain developmental changes. Adopting healthy habits at a young age will

help you maintain them into adulthood. It can also help with the prevention of obesity and related health conditions (for example: type 2 diabetes).

### Here are **5** Healthy Habits to Consider:



#### **1** Engage in Physical Activity

- Join a team or individual sport, finding ways to stay active throughout your day. Teens need at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day
- Find a mix of aerobic, muscle, and bone strengthening activities weekly



#### **2** Eat Well

- Healthy eating supports your immunity and growth
- Choose to eat nutrient dense foods, full of protein, vitamins, minerals and lower in added sugars / saturated fats



#### **3** Get Enough Sleep

- Make sure to get the recommended amount of sleep each night. For teenagers 13 - 18 years of age, 8 - 10 hours per 24 hours (including naps)



#### **4** Reduce Screen Time and Monitor your Social Media Use

- Too much screen time can be linked to poor sleep, weight gain, lower grades in school, and poor mental health
- Social media use may increase a teen's risk of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety – ***be mindful about your time on social media and report any potential signs of bullying***

**If you, or someone you know, is being negatively impacted by social media, ask a friend, trusted adult, or professional for help. For immediate help, call or text 988**



#### **5** Attend Your Annual Wellness Visit with the OB/GYN

- Starting between the ages of 13 - 15, you can now see an OB/GYN each year for a reproductive health checkup—along with your regular physical
- At the OB/GYN, you may receive preventive screenings and have open discussions about your reproductive health

## SECTION II

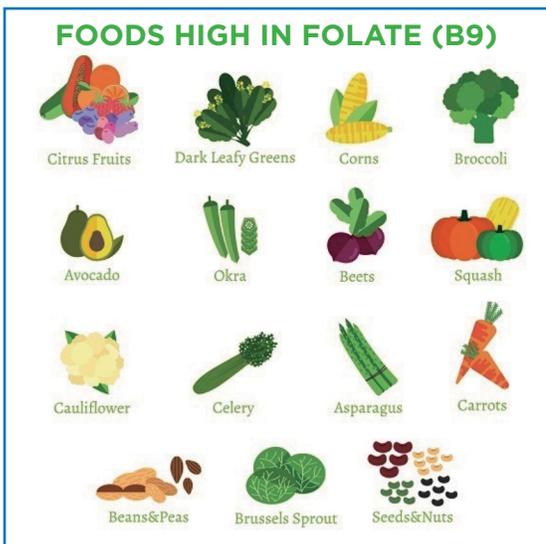
# Supporting Maternal Health: From Pregnancy to Parenthood Within the First Year of Your Child's Life

Motherhood is a key developmental step in a women's life. This section of the toolkit is focused on caring for yourself, having a healthy pregnancy, what to expect during postpartum recovery, and caring for your child in their first year.



## Planning for Pregnancy

Planning for pregnancy can help you feel prepared and improve your chances of having a healthy pregnancy and a healthier you! There are few things to consider as part of your planning:



- **Talk to your provider** about your health history, current medical conditions, all medications you take, vaccinations you have, and your overall lifestyle and behaviors
- **Take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily** which is a vitamin B. The CDC recommends taking folic acid to help prevent neural tube defects – a type of serious birth defect
- **Quit smoking, drinking alcohol, and using certain drugs.** These can cause problems during pregnancy, like premature birth, birth defects, and infant death
- **Avoid toxic substances and contaminants,** which may cause miscarriages or birth defects. Talk with your OB/GYN about ways to stay clear of any harmful toxins in your everyday life
- **Reach and maintain your healthy weight** to avoid any complications with your pregnancy. Women who are overweight or obese are at higher risk for serious conditions and health complications, such as gestational diabetes

## During Pregnancy



**Attend your prenatal care visits and screening tests** to keep you and your baby healthy during pregnancy. At these checkups, you will also receive education and counseling from your OB/GYN on all aspects of your pregnancy. At the first appointment, you will find out the due date and discuss your health history. Each visit thereafter allows you to follow the progress of your pregnancy and your baby's development. These visits are also a time for you to ask any questions about your health, your baby's health, or motherhood in general. Transitioning to motherhood can be overwhelming – your care team is here to help!

## After Pregnancy

After having your baby, the postpartum period can be a time of excitement and nervousness, and many physical changes. If you gave birth within the last year, it is important to discuss with your healthcare provider anything that may not feel right. For your awareness, here are a few things to consider:

### • Breast Feeding After Childbirth

- Breastfeeding is very healthy for both moms and their babies. It gives babies all the nutrients they need for the first six months and may also have longer term health benefits, such as reducing the risk of overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence
- The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends early and uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact between the mother and infant immediately after birth. ***Talk with your healthcare provider on how to begin breastfeeding and how to identify your infant's cues for feeding, closeness and comfort.***

### • Your Physical Activity

- Moderate-intensity physical activity is safe to resume within your postpartum year but check with your doctor about the best time to begin
- When you combine physical activity with healthy eating, it can help with your weight loss journey

### • Your Mental Health

- **Baby Blues:** Immediately after childbirth, some people may feel depressed, anxious, or upset. These feelings are called the 'baby blues' and usually last up to 2 weeks without any treatment
- **Postpartum Depression:** This is a type of depression that causes serious feelings of sadness and anxiety, keeping people from participating in their daily tasks. This type of mood disorder develops within the first year after the birth of the child
  - If you're experiencing some of these feelings or concerns, please consider talking with your primary care provider who can assist in assessing your needs and helping you get the care you need



- **If you are having thoughts of suicide or of harming yourself or others in any way:**
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  - **Call or text 988, or**
  - **Text TALK to 741741**
- Please also see page 10 for more about depression

## Motherhood - Caring for You and Your Baby



Motherhood begins the day you give birth. After giving birth, there is a lot to think about it. It is important to lean on your support system and build a strong relationship with your child's pediatrician for help along the way. It is also important to continue to take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. This section will highlight both topics so that you and your baby can stay healthy.

***For more information on children's health and wellbeing, review the USFHP Children's Wellness Toolkit on our website!***

## Tips for New Moms:

- ✓ **Learn about and monitor for key developmental milestones**, including emotional and social development from birth to one year old
- ✓ **Talk and read to your baby** to help them develop and understand sounds
- ✓ **Spend time holding and cuddling** your baby to help them feel cared for and secure
- ✓ **Make sure your home is safe for the baby!**  
**Here are a few reminders:**
  - Always put your baby to sleep on their back – this reduces the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
  - Keep your home smoke-free

- Keep small toys and objects away from your baby's mouth
- Never shake your baby – it can cause serious brain injury

- ✓ **Limit screen time**, especially for children under 18 months of age
- ✓ **Ensure your child gets lots of sleep**
  - Infants 4 – 12 months of age need 12 - 16 hours per 24 hours (including naps)
- ✓ **Schedule and attend your baby's well-child visits** so they are up to date on important vaccines and screenings. It is also a time to speak with their pediatrician about your child's growth and development



## Taking Care of YOU

Caring for a new baby is a lot of work. It is important to get back to the fundamentals of healthy habits.



- **Drink plenty of water** – when you are breast feeding, your body needs added fluids to stay hydrated
- **Eat nutrient dense and healthy foods, especially while breastfeeding** – when considering food options for snacks/meals, opt for nutrient-dense choices that have limited added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium
- **Sleep when your baby sleeps** – use the time to rest and recover
- **Ask for support** – lean on your friends and family to help while you get adjusted to being a mom

## Military Families and Motherhood

Parenting in a military family can present unique challenges. You may experience moments of solo parenting, a regular occurrence in the lives of military households. Whether it's a few days or several months, it is important to find ways to support you and your children.



Here are a few 'solo parenting' tricks to consider:

- **Adjust your routines:** Find ways to modify your daily tasks to make your life a bit easier. For example, starting your children's bedtime routines earlier, when you're parenting solo, gives you more time to get everything done
- **Simplify your life:** It is okay to choose convenience at times, like getting takeout for a dinner one night, helping you find balance during these moments
- **Enjoy the little things:** Spending one-on-one time with your kids can be very meaningful. Explore new activities together or create lasting memories through special traditions like family movie nights or cooking dinner as a team

## Understanding the Transition to Perimenopause/Menopause

Menopause is the stage of a woman's life when the monthly periods stop for good, and you can no longer become pregnant. It is a normal part of aging for women. In the US, the average age of menopause is 52.

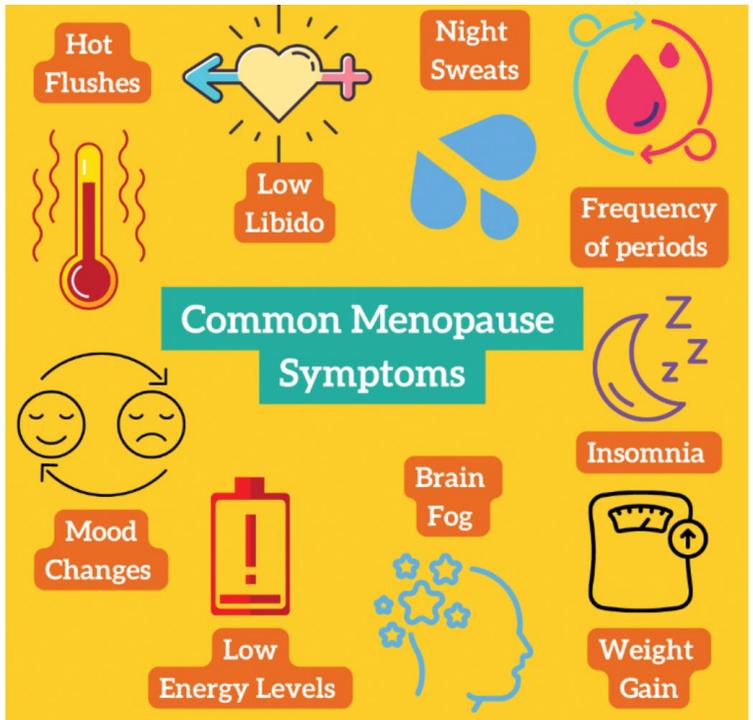
The time leading up to menopause is called the **menopausal transition or 'perimenopause.'** Most women begin the menopausal transition between ages 45 and 55. This process can last for many years. True menopause is confirmed only after one year from the final menstrual period.

### Common Signs and Symptoms:

The most notable sign for women is a **change in their period.** Periods may become shorter or longer and you may bleed more or less than usual. Speak to your provider about these changes or if you have any questions.

Every woman's experience with symptoms can vary due to a variety of factors. Symptoms can last between 2 and 8 years, and while some may have mild or no symptoms at all, others may experience:

- **Hot flashes/night sweats** (also called vasomotor symptoms)
  - This is the most common symptom of menopause, likely related to the changing hormone levels for women
- **Bladder control issues**
  - During menopause, many women experience bladder or urinary issues, such as a sudden urge to urinate or leakage during activities like exercising, sneezing, or laughing. Menopause also increases the risk of developing urinary tract infections



- Some women may have difficulty falling asleep or wake up too early. Try to follow a regular sleep schedule and develop a consistent bedtime routine

- **Mood changes**

- Your body is going through major changes, and it may leave you feeling more irritable or agitated

- Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional about what you're experiencing and ways to feel better

- **If you are having thoughts of suicide or of harming yourself or others in any way:**

- **Talk to a friend, family member, or health professional**
- **Call or text 988, or**
- **Text TALK to 741741**



## Changes in Your Body

During the woman's menopausal transition, the body's production of two important female hormones made by the ovaries – **estrogen and progesterone** – declines. The changes in these hormones can explain some of the symptoms women experience.

The menopausal transition can also change the way the body uses energy. Women may notice changes in their bone density, heart health, body shape, or general physical function. Given these changes, after menopause, women are at greater risk for certain health conditions, such as:

- **Heart disease**
- **Stroke**
- **Osteoporosis** –  
*a disease that weakens bones*

## How to Stay Healthy During Menopause



- ✓ **Eat a healthy balanced diet**  
- Make sure to get enough calcium and Vitamin D to strengthen your bones
- ✓ **Engage in routine physical activity**  
- Staying active also helps slow bone loss and maintain strength
- ✓ **Maintain a healthy weight to keep your heart healthy**
- ✓ **Avoid alcohol or consume in moderation**

## SECTION IV

### Important Health Screenings at Each Stage of Life

Screening tests are essential preventive tools that help detect potential health conditions before any symptoms appear. USFHP encourages all women to take advantage of these screenings to stay proactive about their health and to identify any concerns early, when they are often easier to treat.

The recommendations are from the VA's National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention based on the **average risk**. Talk to your doctor if you may have additional risk or a family history to be aware of.

Screening Test	Recommended Age	Frequency / Notes
HIV	18+	Screen at least once; annually if at higher risk; all pregnant women
Depression	18+	Annually or at regular health visits
High Blood Pressure	18+	At least once a year
STIs (Chlamydia, Gonorrhea)	18–24 (sexually active)	Annual screening; 25+ if at risk
Hepatitis B	All pregnant women	Screen early in each pregnancy
Hepatitis C	18–79	Screen once; during each pregnancy
Cervical Cancer (Pap Test)	21–29	Every 3 years
Cervical Cancer (Pap + HPV)	30–65	Pap + HPV every 5 years, or Pap alone every 3 years
Breast Cancer (Mammogram)	40–74	Every 2 years; talk to your provider about frequency
Colon Cancer	45–75	Start at 45 (colonoscopy, stool tests, etc.)
Lung Cancer (Low-Dose CT)	50–80 (if at risk)	Annual if history of heavy smoking and currently smoking or quit within past 15 years
Osteoporosis (Bone Density Test)	65+	Screen once at age 65 or earlier if at higher risk

## SECTION V

### Personal Safety

#### Ways to Protect Your Personal Safety

Anyone can experience violence, bullying, or threats to their safety. Whether this is from a partner, peer, or someone in the school/social environment, it is important to be aware of and educated about the warning signs and ways to protect yourself. Intimate partner violence and bullying can have lasting effects on your emotional, physical, and mental wellbeing. You're not alone—there's help and support available.

**Prevention:** Personal safety starts with awareness and early prevention. If you're suffering from relationship abuse or bullying at school, it is important to understand the risks and warning signs, build a strong support network, and know when and how to get help.

**Warning Signs:** Knowing the different forms of harmful behavior can help you act early and plan for safety. These signs may show up in relationships, friendships, school, or online (for example: social media platforms).

#### In Relationships (Intimate Partner Violence):

- **Expressive Aggression** – Your partner insults or humiliates you in a way that makes you feel unsafe
- **Coercive Control** – Your partner uses threats, isolates you from others, monitors your actions,

or tries to control your decisions or finances

- **Physical Violence** – You are hurt or physically threatened
- **Sexual Violence** – You are forced or pressured into sexual activity without your consent
- **Stalking** – You are followed, watched, or contacted repeatedly in a way that causes fear

#### In Social or School Settings (Bullying):

- **Verbal Bullying** – Name-calling, teasing, or verbal threats meant to hurt or intimidate you
- **Social Bullying** – Excluding someone on purpose, spreading rumors, or damaging relationships/reputations
- **Physical Bullying** – Pushing, hitting, or tripping
- **Cyberbullying** – Harmful messages, posts, or images shared online or through social media

***If you've experienced any form of aggression, whether from a partner or peer or anyone else, you may notice changes in how you think, feel, or behave, such as:***

- Depression and/or anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts and/or behavior
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of trust or fear of intimacy
- Isolation or loneliness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Emotional detachment

#### General Safety Tips

- ✓ **Trust your instincts** – If a situation feels wrong, take it seriously. Stand up for others if you see them being bullied
- ✓ **Stay connected** – Share your plans with someone you trust and keep your phone charged and accessible
- ✓ **Avoid isolation** – Try to stay in public or with groups, especially in uncomfortable situations. Always have your phone on you
- ✓ **Protect your digital space** – Use privacy settings on social media and block/report threatening messages. Keep your passwords safe from others
- ✓ **Know your resources** – Be aware of support lines, school counselors, and local safety organizations

#### How to Get Help

Talk to someone you trust—this could be a family member, friend, teacher, school counselor, or your healthcare provider. There are also confidential resources available to help you create a safety plan and start healing.



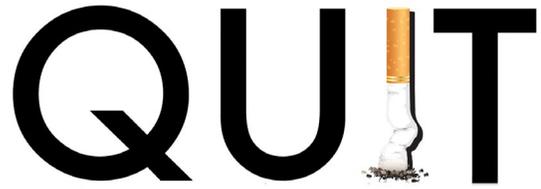
***If you, or someone you know, is suffering from intimate partner violence, call the Domestic Violence hotline to receive support. 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).***

## SECTION VI

### Smoking/Vaping

#### Reasons to Stop

- **Maintain or become tobacco free** - Smoking and/or vaping is highly addictive and harmful to the body due to nicotine and tobacco. Given nicotine's addictive properties, people can feel strong pulls of withdrawal when they're not consuming nicotine such as feeling down, sad, difficulty sleeping, irritability and restlessness. Tobacco use damages almost every organ in the body, and people who use tobacco have two times the risk of having a stroke and four times the risk of heart disease. For women specifically, it can also lead to the worsening of menstruation and menopausal symptoms
  - **Secondhand smoke is another serious health concern.** Secondhand smoke contains many toxic chemicals that someone can inhale and can cause SIDS, respiratory



infections, ear infections, and asthma attacks in infants and children

- **Helpful strategies for quitting** include minimizing time with smokers/tobacco users, managing cravings, seeking support, and consulting your provider about over-the-counter medications
- **Quitting tobacco reduces your risk of several critical diseases.** It is also the best way to protect your family members from health risks associated with secondhand smoke

*To learn more about quitting or becoming tobacco free, please refer to the USFHP Tobacco Cessation Toolkit in the Members section, Population Health page of our website*

## SECTION VII

### Depression - Caring for Your Mental Health at All Ages

- *Do you feel like you're in a rut and you just can't get out? Everyone feels sad at times, but those feelings typically will pass within a few days. If you can't seem to rally, and it's starting to interfere with your daily life, it could be a sign of depression. Depressive disorder can affect anyone. It may be marked by feelings of intense sadness or hopelessness, and some find that they lose interest or pleasure in activities that they used to enjoy. People with depression can experience feelings of guilt, unworthiness, or low self-esteem, and they may start avoiding being around people. Depression is a common but serious disorder—one that typically requires some treatment to manage. The good news is that even the most severe cases of depression are treatable. The signs and symptoms of depression may be hard to notice at first, so it's important to be aware of your thoughts, moods, and behaviors and note if they start to change (Taken from the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) Mental Health page about Depression; <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/depression/index.asp>)*
- **The National Institutes for Health (NIH) outlines 4 things to know about depression in women.**  
These are:
  - Depression is a medical condition
  - Depression has signs and symptoms to look out for
  - Certain types of depression are unique to women
  - You can get help for depression
  - Please access the fact sheet for a full discussion at (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-in-women>)
- Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional about what you're experiencing and ways to feel better

*If you are having thoughts of suicide or of harming yourself or others in any way:*

- *Talk to a friend, family member, or health professional*
- *Call or text 988, or*
- *Text TALK to 741741*

## SECTION VIII

### Support and Helpful Resources



USFHP Care Managers are available to support you in addressing your needs. If you have questions about your health or about USFHP Care Management services, please call us at **1-800-241-4848**.

- For assistance connecting to mental health treatment, USFHP's Behavioral Health Care Managers are available to assist and can be reached via **1-800-241-4848**.

**And remember, if you are having thoughts of suicide or of harming yourself or others in any way:**

- **Talk to a friend, family member, or health professional**
- **Call or text 988, or**
- **Text TALK to 741741**

### Additional Resources/Specific Sources

#### SECTION I:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/womens-health/features/nwhw.html>
- <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/Physical-Development-Girls-What-to-Expect.aspx>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/hygiene/about/menstrual-hygiene.html>
- <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/tips-tools/symptom-checker/Pages/symptomviewer.aspx?symptom=Menstrual+Cramps>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/young-teens-12-14-years.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/adding-children-adolescents/what-counts.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-weight-growth/tips-parents-caregivers/index.html>
- [https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/features/healthy-eating-tips.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fncddphp%2Fdnbao%2Ffeatures%2Fhealthy-eating-tips%2Findex.html](https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/features/healthy-eating-tips.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fncddphp%2Fdnbao%2Ffeatures%2Fhealthy-eating-tips%2Findex.html)
- <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2020/10/the-initial-reproductive-health-visit#:~:text=The%20initial%20reproductive%20health%20visit%20should%20take%20place%20between,of%2013%20and%2015%20years.>

#### SECTION II:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/pregnancy/about/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/about/gestational-diabetes.html>
- <https://womenshealth.gov/pregnancy/youre-pregnant-now-what/prenatal-care-and-tests>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-weight/growth/tips-parents-caregivers/index.html>
- <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/postpartum-depression>
- <https://www.who.int/tools/elena/interventions/breastfeeding-support>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/infants.html>
- <https://www.hhs.gov/healthcare/maternal-health/newborn-supply-kit/support-for-you/index.html>
- <https://blog-brigade.militaryonesource.mil/2025/04/22/blogs-parenting-solo-military-parenting/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/secondhand-smoke/health.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/state-fact-sheets/index.htm>

#### SECTION III:

- <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/menopause/what-menopause>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/womens-health/features/menopause-womens-health-and-work.html>

#### SECTION IV:

- [https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy\\_Living/Get\\_Recommended\\_Screening\\_Tests\\_and\\_Immunizations.asp](https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy_Living/Get_Recommended_Screening_Tests_and_Immunizations.asp)
- [https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy\\_Living/Get\\_Recommended\\_Screening\\_Tests\\_and\\_Immunizations\\_for\\_Women.asp#medications](https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy_Living/Get_Recommended_Screening_Tests_and_Immunizations_for_Women.asp#medications)

#### SECTION V:

- <https://www.apa.org/topics/physical-abuse-violence/intimate-partner>
- <https://www.thehotline.org/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/intimate-partner-violence/about/index.html>
- <https://www.stopbullying.gov/kids/what-you-can-do>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/youth-violence/about/about-bullying.html>

#### SECTION VII:

- <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/depression/index.asp>
- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-in-women>



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**US FAMILY  
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## **Women's Health Toolkit**

**Learn about Women's Health Today!**

