

The Central Pennsylvania Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes' Central Pennsylvania Women's Health Study (CePAWHS):

BECAUSE WOMEN'S  
HEALTH STATUS

BEFORE  
PREGNANCY

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The Central Pennsylvania Women's Health Study (CePAWHS) is an innovative research program focusing on the health of reproductive-age women in predominantly rural Central Pennsylvania. The research is conducted by the Central Pennsylvania Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes, based at the Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, PA. The Center's vision is to reduce adverse pregnancy outcomes, specifically preterm birth and low birthweight (LBW), by improving women's health preconceptionally, or before they become pregnant, and interconceptionally, or in between pregnancies.

It has been known for decades that reproductive-age women's health status and indicators of potential health risks matter a great deal when they are pregnant. It is for this reason that prenatal care is covered for most women in the United States, regardless of citizenship. Health care providers currently advise women not to smoke, drink, or take certain medications known to be harmful to developing fetuses during pregnancy. Additionally, pregnant women are encouraged to be vigilant about proper nutrition, including taking a daily prenatal vitamin containing no less than 600 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid, and to be physically active. During pregnancy, women are told to practice good health so that they can have the healthiest babies possible, who are not born prematurely or low birth



MATTERS AS MUCH  
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STATUS AFTER THEY  
BECOME PREGNANT.

weight, as these conditions pose known health risks to infants as well as potential long-term health consequences.

Until very recently, however, the health of women pre- and interconceptionally has received far less attention than the importance of prenatal care. The importance of pre- and interconception health and health care received its first significant national attention in April 2006 when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released its *Recommendations for Preconception Health and Health Care*. Both these recommendations and CePAWHS focus on optimizing women's health-related behaviors prior to pregnancy because many women do not realize they are pregnant in time to affect the early development of the fetus. In addition, some chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, cannot be optimally managed once a woman has become pregnant due to the adverse effect of some medications on the developing fetus.

In June 2004, nearly two years before the CDC released the *Recommendations for Preconception Health and Health Care*, the Central

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Pennsylvania Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes was funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Health to field the first comprehensive study of women of reproductive-age in Central Pennsylvania. The Central Pennsylvania Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes is a collaborative partnership of the Penn State College of Medicine, Family Health Council of Central Pennsylvania, Franklin and Marshall College, and Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. The project also has a Steering Committee of community representatives and stakeholders.

In the first phase of CePAWHS, 2,002 reproductive-age women in the Central PA general population participated in a random digit dial (RDD) telephone survey about health status and indicators of potential health risks. An additional survey of 288 Old Order Amish

women was conducted in their homes in Lancaster County, because these women do not have household telephones. Results of these surveys showed that women in our region have a number of health risks, including relatively high levels of overweight and obesity, nutritional deficits, lack of physical activity, stress and depressive symptoms, smoking, and alcohol use (especially binge drinking among younger adult women). The assumption that rural residence protects women from some of these health risks was not supported by the survey data.

The results of the surveys formed the basis of *Strong Healthy Women*, a health behavior change intervention developed by Penn State researchers. The intervention targeted women ages 18-35 who were not currently pregnant, but were capable of becoming pregnant. The intervention was tested in a randomized trial

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involving 692 women recruited in 15 rural and low-income communities of Central PA. Women who were randomized to the intervention met in 6 small group sessions in their communities over a 12-week period. The sessions were led by trained facilitators who followed a curriculum providing information and skills related to stress management, nutrition, physical activity, tobacco and alcohol, preventing gynecological infections, and pregnancy planning. The intervention study is still in the field and final results will be available in the spring of 2008.

Carol S. Weisman, PhD, Department of Public Health Sciences, Penn State College of Medicine, directs the Central Pennsylvania Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes and is the principal investigator of CePAWHS. Co-principal investigators of CePAWHS are Marianne M. Hillemeier, PhD, Department of Health Policy and Administration, College of Health and Human Development, University Park, and John J. Botti, MD, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Penn State College of Medicine. The project director is Sara A. Baker, MSW, LSW, Penn State College of Medicine. For more information on CePAWHS research findings and publications, or the Central PA Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes, please visit [www.womenshealthcoe.psu.edu](http://www.womenshealthcoe.psu.edu).



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