

themselves, but if each parent-to-be carries the same gene, then the couple is at 25% risk for having an affected child in any given pregnancy.

Thalassemia is characterized by a chronic debilitating anemia which requires lifelong medical management. Thalassemia can be fatal if untreated. Management strategies include blood transfusions and iron chelation therapy, although a few cases can now be cured through bone marrow transplantation. Prenatal testing is available to couples when both members have been identified as carriers of this disease.

A marriage may not take place in New York State between an ancestor and descendant, siblings (full or half blood), an uncle and niece or nephew or an aunt and niece or nephew, regardless of whether or not these persons are legitimate or illegitimate offspring.

If you have questions because of your family or medical history, a genetic counselor can help. Call (518) 474-7148 to reach the New York State Department of Health's Genetic Services Program, or call the March of Dimes Resource Center toll-free at 1-888-MODIMES for information and referral on issues concerning pregnancy and birth defects.

Other Factors

The health of the unborn baby can also be influenced by other factors, such as exposure to alcohol, cigarettes, or certain medications such as Accutane® [isotretinoin] or Dilantin® [phenytoin]. The mother's age and health status may be important. Women with diabetes, for example, should discuss their special risks with their health care providers. The mother's nutritional status may also play a role. All women of childbearing age (15-45) are advised to supplement their diet with 0.4 milligrams of folic acid (one of the B vitamins) prior to conception and during their pregnancies to reduce the risk of birth defects such as spina bifida and anencephaly. A couple concerned about any of these factors should discuss their concerns with a health care professional before becoming pregnant. In fact, a pre-pregnancy visit is an excellent idea for every couple!

A Final Wish...

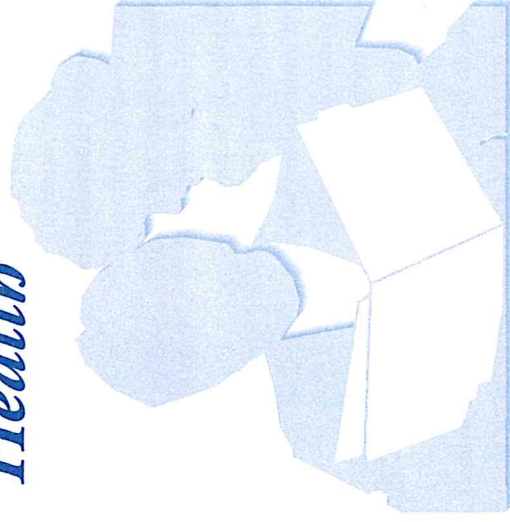
Your health and that of your future children are of utmost importance and deserve attention. And please accept our wishes for a happy and healthy marriage!

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State of New York
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Thinking About the Next Generation's Health



Information
for Persons
Applying for
a Marriage License

If you're about to be married, there are several health issues for you to consider. Here is important information that could affect your health and that of your future children.

Infectious Diseases

Infectious diseases are often "silent." You or your new spouse may have been exposed to one of several infectious diseases. The most common ones are as follows:

Syphilis

Syphilis is caused by an organism that enters the blood stream during sex and can attack all parts of the body. Untreated, syphilis can cause blindness, heart disease and insanity.

With adequate and timely treatment, the effects of syphilis can be prevented in the infected individual and in the unborn baby.

Syphilis can be treated with antibiotics, but no medicine can repair damage that syphilis has already done to the body. In New York State, every pregnant woman must have a blood test for syphilis. Discuss this with your health care provider as soon as you know that you are pregnant.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by a virus carried in the blood, saliva, semen and other body fluids of an infected person. It is spread by sexual contact or sharing equipment to shoot drugs. Hepatitis B is especially dangerous for the babies of women who have the disease or who are carriers of the virus. In New York State, every pregnant woman must have a blood test for the virus. If she has the virus, her baby can be protected from the disease by immunization immediately after birth.

HIV/AIDS

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. Many people infected with HIV have no signs or symptoms and may not know they are infected with the virus. Men and women with HIV can pass the virus on to their sex or needle-sharing partners. If an HIV-infected woman gets pregnant, she can pass the virus to her baby. But if she *knows* she has HIV, she can take special medicines during pregnancy that will reduce the chance that her baby will be infected.

The following people are at risk for HIV:

- anyone who has ever shared a needle to shoot drugs
- anyone who ever had sex with a man or a woman who shoots drugs
- anyone who has had previous sexual partners – the more partners, the greater the chances
- anyone who received a blood transfusion or blood products before 1985

A blood test can determine if you have the HIV virus. Many couples choose to get tested before marriage, to protect each other and their future children. Your doctor or health care provider can test or refer you. Or you can call the New York State Department of Health at 1-800-541-AIDS.

Rubella

Rubella is a common childhood disease. Rubella infection poses a grave threat to the unborn child, especially during the first four months of pregnancy. Rubella infection can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, deafness, blindness, crippling, congenital heart disease, mental retardation, neurological problems, and muscular and bone defects.

You are susceptible to rubella if you have not had rubella and/or you did not have a rubella immunization. To learn whether you are susceptible, have your doctor order a blood test. If you *know* you've never had rubella, get immunized.

Other infectious diseases that can affect the unborn baby's health include cytomegalovirus, toxoplasmosis and herpes. Ask your health care provider for further information. Birth defects caused by infectious diseases are especially tragic because they are preventable.

Inherited Diseases

All couples have a 3-4% risk of having a child with a birth defect or genetic condition. Some genetic conditions are more common in certain ethnic groups, and require no prior family history of the disease in order to appear. Examples are thalassemia, sickle cell disease, cystic fibrosis and Tay-Sachs disease.

Those at highest risk are listed below:

- Thalassemia - Individuals of Mediterranean, Asian, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, or African-American heritage

- Sickle Cell Disease - African Americans, and individuals from the Caribbean, Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia and the Mediterranean

- Cystic Fibrosis - Caucasians from Northern Europe

- Tay-Sachs Disease - Jews from Eastern Europe

Special genetic tests are available for all of these conditions. These tests can show if you "carry" one of these genes. A person who has one gene for a genetic disease is called a "carrier." Carriers rarely have detectable signs of the disorder