

Expecting joy! Pregnancy care in Polk County

By: Dr. Amy Marietta

Perhaps at no other time in a woman's life is access to medical care as important as when she learns she is pregnant. Prenatal, or pregnancy care is essential to ensure a healthy pregnancy, to reduce the risks of complications during labor and delivery, and to deliver that healthy (and cute!) new addition to your family. Here are some common questions and answers about pregnancy care.

What does pregnancy care include?

Pregnancy care includes ensuring that the baby is developing normally, preventing and treating any health conditions that may make a pregnancy high risk, providing education related to pregnancy, and planning for delivery closer to the end of the pregnancy. Most pregnancy care will include bloodwork, ultrasound, and regular office visits to monitor weight, nutrition status, and baby's well-being. Sometimes additional testing, such as genetic screening, fetal monitoring, or additional ultrasounds may be needed.

Who provides pregnancy care?

Pregnancy care can be provided by a variety of healthcare professionals, including obstetricians, family physicians, and midwives. These clinicians practice in a variety of settings, including county health departments and community health centers. While some family doctors may have completed additional training to provide c-sections, most family doctors and midwives work closely with back-up obstetrical providers who can provide c-sections and high-risk consultation, if needed.

How do I choose a pregnancy care provider?

The best choice for a pregnancy care provider depends on several factors, including a woman's health history, her planned delivery site, and factors that may influence her ability to attend her prenatal appointments, such as location, transportation, and cost. Studies have shown that when women must travel more than an hour for pregnancy care, they are less likely to receive adequate care, more likely to experience complications, and their babies are more likely to require a stay in neonatal intensive care.

Family doctors are ideally suited to provide pregnancy care because of their training to care for the whole family. After delivery, a family doctor can provide newborn checkups and ongoing well child care. In rural parts of North Carolina, including Polk County, family doctors are essential to ensure that women have access to pregnancy care close to home, since many counties do not have practicing obstetricians. On average, a woman will attend about 12-15 prenatal visits over the course of her pregnancy, so it is important to choose a clinician with whom mom trusts and can develop a relationship.

What resources are available in Polk County?

Since 2015, Blue Ridge Health has been providing comprehensive pregnancy care to women in Polk County, including pregnancy testing, lab work, prenatal office visits, fetal monitoring, and delivery services. The Polk County practice, located at 155 West Mills Street, has also been designated as the county's first "Pregnancy Medical Home". The Pregnancy Medical Home program aims to increase the quality of pregnancy care to women and infants across North Carolina and prevent preterm birth, unnecessary c-sections, and low birth weights.

The team at Blue Ridge Health works together to ensure that women get individualized, high quality pregnancy care. Most services are available on site, making travel outside the county for pregnancy care unnecessary. Pregnancy care clinicians work together with nurses, pregnancy care managers, patient navigators, nutritionists, and if necessary, high-risk obstetrical consultants to provide women with comprehensive pregnancy care. For pregnant and postpartum women struggling with alcohol, tobacco, or drug use, a perinatal recovery group is held on site to support women during their pregnancy and after.

I'm pregnant. Where do I start? What questions should I ask?

Congratulations! First, start by taking care of yourself and your baby. Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Start taking a prenatal vitamin. Avoid tobacco, drinking alcohol or any drug use. Consider where you would like to receive your pregnancy care. Remember, you must feel comfortable with your pregnancy care provider, so it's a good idea to research your options and find a provider who suits your needs.

Questions to ask include:

- Do you provide prenatal care only, or do you do deliveries as well?
- How long have you been in practice? How many deliveries have you attended?
- What hospital are you affiliated with? Where would I deliver?
- Are you part of a call group? Who would deliver my baby if you are not available?
- Do you accept my insurance? What is the cost for visits if I am uninsured?
- Do you follow high risk pregnancies?
- What is your c-section rate?
- What services do you provide on-site? Labs? Ultrasound? Nutrition counseling? Fetal monitoring? If not in your office, where will I have these things done?

Dr. Amy Marietta is a board-certified family physician with Blue Ridge Health clinic in Columbus, NC. She and the team at Blue Ridge Health provide comprehensive pregnancy care for all women, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay.

PF3 is a group of 120+ community members, leaders and health professionals working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. PF3 welcomes any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place for all. For more information and a complete list of 2018 meeting dates, please visit our website at <http://www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org>.