

DEAR DAUGHTER, DEAR SON!

This letter is about having children. Maybe you still have a long time to go before you get there, or you are not sure yet whether you want to have children at all, but I would appreciate it if you would read this letter anyway.

In the first few weeks of its existence a child is at its most vulnerable: right after the conception, when the egg cell and the sperm cell merge and start to divide at a remarkable pace from pinhead-size into an embryo the size of a peanut. During this period all organs and parts of the body are being formed, so if something goes wrong now it can affect a child for the rest of its life.

This is all very well, but your partner and you will not even know at this stage whether you have conceived a baby, even if you were planning it. This means that, for the baby's sake, you need to plan and prepare to be parents in advance! You and your partner can do quite a lot to increase the chances of having a healthy child.

I am sure you are already familiar with many of the things that are important in this stage, such as a healthy lifestyle (no smoking, no alcohol, no drugs) and good nutrition (high intake of fruit and vegetables, limited portions of oily fish and liver products, no raw-milk cheese, taking oral folic acid from 4 weeks before until 8 weeks after conception).

But there are also other aspects that play an important role, such as your own health, former illnesses, your age, medication, genetics, carrier status tests, prenatal and preconceptional screening studies (to determine blood type, whether you had Rubella and which vaccinations), circumstances at home and at work, and preventing unnecessary infections through cat box litter, gardening or exotic travel. What a long, daunting list! Does anyone really meet all these requirements and follow all these guidelines? Don't worry, help is at hand.

Normally, the midwife, the general practitioner or the gynaecologist/obstetrician, will give you advice when you visit them for your first pregnancy check-up. But by that time the embryo is already about 6-8 weeks old. It would be much better if you get the advice before this first appointment, during the time you are actually thinking about getting pregnant, and especially if you are not actively preventing pregnancy.

This kind of preconception consultation has not yet become common in most countries. However, you can still get information from a professional if you want. How and where varies depending on your country. For actual information you can take a look on the website that is currently used in The Netherlands by midwives and general practitioners. Among other things you can find a questionnaire here that shows you what questions and answers are relevant for you specifically: <http://www.raghphc.org/files/ZwangerWijzer%20Quest%20Eng.pdf> .

If you are already under a gynaecologist's care, or any other specialist due to a (chronic) condition, it is particularly important to know beforehand if there is anything you should or should not do when trying to get pregnant. For example, it can be better to stay off certain medications or replace them with others that can't do any harm to the developing baby.

If you would like to find out more about the important elements of the first phase of a pregnancy, have a look on this website www.strakswangerworden.nl (short video available in English and other languages, other information for now in Dutch only) of the Perinatal Care Board. The Dutch Health Ministry has appointed this Board to improve and maintain the quality of maternal and child health care in the Netherlands.

I hope this letter offers you new insights and helps you and your partner to get prepared for when you are ready to start your family.

I wish you both – and your next generation – the best of health and happiness

This letter is developed for me by the



Rotary

Rotarian Action Group
Healthy Pregnancies / Healthy Children

