

THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

WHAT IS THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE?

Rather than looking at health only when a problem develops or during a particular health stage, like pregnancy, the life course perspective considers health across an entire lifetime. Experiences during childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and other important stages can build upon one another and influence our health trajectory.

Our health stories are not shaped by choice alone. Where we live, working conditions, access to nutritious food, access to healthcare, environmental exposures, stressors and support systems can influence health over time. Concurrently, protective experiences and resource, like economic stability, access to preventative care, supportive relationships, and safe environments can strengthen health and well-being. The life course perspectives encourages individuals to ask the question:



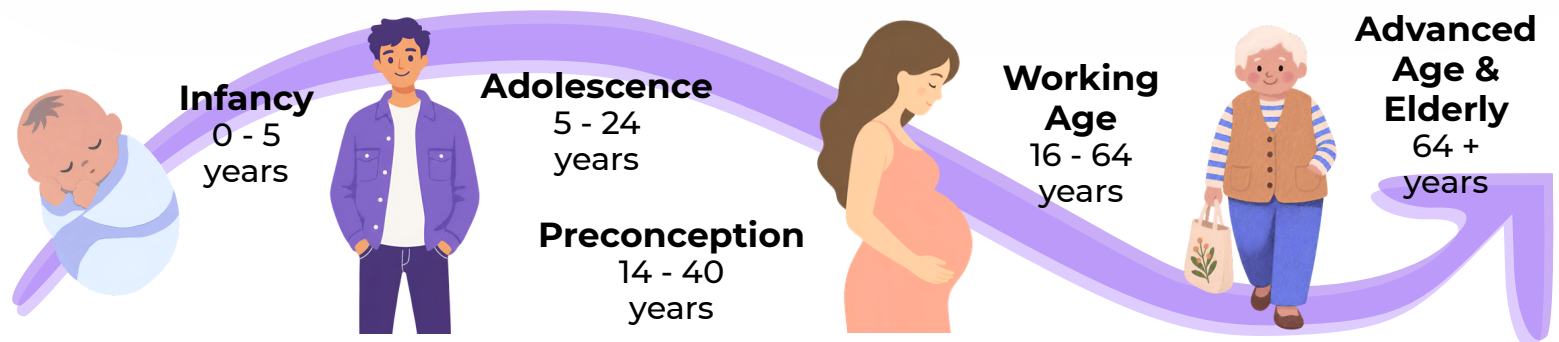
Instead of only addressing health when something happens, how can we support good health throughout life?

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO PRECONCEPTION CARE?

Preconception health is one way we can put the life course perspective into practice.

Reproductive healthcare is often separated into separate stages: before pregnancy, pregnancy, postpartum, and everything else.

The life course perspective reminds us that these stages are connected.



Health entering pregnancy develops over months and years. CDC guidance describes preconception care as part of a broader approach to supporting health throughout the reproductive years, including before, in-between, and after pregnancies.

For example: regularly checking blood pressure may help identify hypertension before pregnancy is being considered. Managing this condition can improve pregnancy outcomes as well as long-term general health.

An important lesson from the life course perspective is that preconception health has value whether or not someone plans to become pregnant.

Many of the factors that define preconception health are simply good preventative health factors. Managing chronic conditions, practicing sleep hygiene, supporting mental health, eating nutritious foods when accessible, being physically active, avoiding substances, and maintaining healthy social supports can benefit health throughout your life.

WHAT FACTORS SHAPE HEALTH ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE?

AREA	RISK FACTORS	PROTECTIVE FACTORS
HEALTH CARE ACCESS	Limited access to preventative care, lack of insurance, difficulty obtaining mental or reproductive healthcare	Regular preventative care, accessible health services, access to all screenings and vaccinations
HEALTH BEHAVIORS	Substance use, limited opportunity for physical activity, low or no access to nutritional food, inadequate sleep	Physical activity, adequate sleep, balanced nutrition, tobacco and substance use cessation
SOCIAL CONDITIONS	Discrimination, chronic stress, exposure to violence, social isolation	Supportive relationships, community belonging, safety
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	Environmental hazards, air and water pollution, limited transportation, unstable or unsafe housing	Clean air and water, reliable transportation, safe and stable housing
HEALTH CONDITIONS	Undiagnosed or poorly managed chronic conditions, untreated mental health concerns	Early identification of ongoing management of physical, mental health, and chronic conditions
ECONOMIC	Financial instability and food insecurity	Financial stability, stable economic support or employment

Several of these factors are hallmarks of preconception health. By focusing on these areas and how they impact the life course, overall health and wellness can be improved regardless of pregnancy intention.

It is also important to note that some of these factors may be out of an individual's control. Focusing on modifiable lifestyle factors can be a great place to start when focusing on overall health throughout your lifetime.

Information for this newsletter was sourced from the CDC and the March of Dimes. To learn more about preconception health and wellness, visit www.ncpreconceptionhealth.org