Preparing for Pregnancy: An Early Decision for Better Outcomes

Promoting Preconception Health in Qatar

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Many people think that health begins at birth, but research shows that it starts much earlier. Before a baby is born, and even before pregnancy occurs, the foundations of health are quietly being laid. For example, parents' nutrition and lifestyle before pregnancy strongly influence children's development and their risk of developing diseases (Jahan-Mihan et al., 2024). This critical stage, known as the preconception phase, has been the focus of our research study.

In collaboration with the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC), the research team at Qatar University (QU) consisting of Prof. Hanan Abdul Rahim, Professor of Public Health (Epidemiology), Dr. Ghadir Al-Jayyousi, Assistant Professor of Public Health, and MPH students Abdullah M. A. Ananzeh and Maaira Shahbaz are conducting a study aimed at enhancing the understanding, measurement, and support of preconception health in Qatar by developing a core set of monitoring indicators that enable the health system to monitor, analyze and improve the health of men and women before pregnancy. The study is supported by a Collaborative Grant from Qatar University (QUCG-CHS-25/26-725).

The importance of having a core set of indicators

A strong public health system relies on accurate and consistent measurement of health events. Without clear measurement indicators that are regularly collected, it is difficult to assess the current situation or to make decisions on what needs to be improved.

The study seeks to identify a set of preconception health indicators that are:

- **Holistic:** Reflecting the most important aspects of pre-pregnancy health.
- **Sensitive:** Able to detect important changes over time.
- **Planning-oriented:** Assists decision-makers in developing policies and programs that respond to actual needs.
- **Feasible:** Can be easily collected and followed within the health system in the State of Qatar.

For example, these indicators may include the proportion of women who take folic acid before pregnancy, the percentage of young people who maintain a healthy weight, and the level of demand for genetic counseling among couples and others. Regular tracking of these indicators also allows health authorities to identify gaps, monitor trends, and design targeted interventions that contribute to improving the health of current and future generations.

Study Methodology

The study follows an integrated methodology that combines review of the scientific literature with input from healthcare professionals and

community members, to ensure that the proposed indicators are effective and applicable. The stages of the study include:

1. **Scoping review:** to map the global and regional literature and identify potential preconception health indicators. The review focused on countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR).
2. **Qualitative interviews:** Exploring the perspectives of members of the public to understand their views, priorities, and preferences regarding preconception care
3. **A Delphi survey:** Building consensus among experts and community representatives on the final set of indicators.
4. **Implementation and Feasibility Assessment:** Evaluating the acceptability, feasibility, and organizational readiness for integrating the finalized indicator set into Qatar's primary healthcare system through consultations with healthcare providers and decision-makers.

Progress to Date

The first phase of the study has been successfully completed through a comprehensive scoping review of the international and regional literature on preconception health indicators. The review identified a wide range of indicators currently used across countries and highlighted considerable variation in how preconception health is monitored, underscoring the need for a standardized core indicator set. The review also found that preconception care in the EMR remains biomedical and screening- focused with limited integration of psychosocial and health system determinants.

These findings provided the scientific foundation for the subsequent phases of the study, including rounds of stakeholder consultations, expert consensus, and feasibility assessment within Qatar's primary healthcare system.

An International Collaboration

This study is part of an international movement and global studies to advance preconception health.

Qatar has contributed to this effort through the International Core Indicators for Preconception Health (iCIPHE) Alliance led by Dr Danielle Schoenaker from the University of Southhampton and Professor Judith Stevenson from the Institute of Child Health at University College London (UCL) since 2022.

The researchers at Qatar University are part of this alliance, and Dr. Ghadeer Al-Jayyousi is a member of its core working team, which developed the protocol for identifying a unified set of indicators applicable in high, middle, and low income countries (Schoenaker et al., 2026a).

In 2024, Dr. Ghadeer Al-Jayyousi participated in the WHO meeting in Geneva entitled "Reshaping Care Services to Improve Preconception Health", where the meeting discussed global evidence and identified key care standards and gaps to guide future policies and programs (WHO, 2024).

The work of the iCIPHE, including the contribution from the Qatar study team, were recently published in the renowned medical journal, the Lancet (Schoenaker et al., 2026b). Through this international cooperation, Qatar is contributing to shaping the global dialogue on preconception health and has ensured that its national efforts are aligned with the highest scientific and practical standards.

Why it Matters

The future of health lies in prevention. Waiting until illness appears is often too late, too costly, or too complex. By acting earlier, we can shape healthier generations.

In Qatar, which is characterized by a young and growing demographic, this study aims to support young people in adopting healthy habits and empower them to reduce risk factors, help couples plan consciously, and encourage parents to lead by example to their children.

This study is more than just scientific research, it is a national and societal commitment to recognize that health begins long before birth, through the daily choices we make.

At Qatar University, in collaboration with the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC), and within the framework of the World Health Organization (WHO) vision, the research team is working to promote preconception health to become a key pillar of health policies and community practices in Qatar.