

Conceiving a baby - tips

The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation (the release of the egg from the ovary) are approximately one in five every month. Around nine out of 10 couples achieve a pregnancy after one year of unprotected sex. There are various strategies that can improve your odds of conceiving. Identifying the woman's fertile phase is the most important.

Pre-pregnancy tests

It is a good idea to see your doctor and make sure you are physically fit and healthy for an impending pregnancy. Some of the tests you may consider include:

- General examination
- Pap smear
- Tests for any sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), such as chlamydia, which can interfere with fertility
- Blood tests to check for anaemia, your Rh (Rhesus) factor and your immunity against rubella (German measles)
- Urine tests to check for diabetes
- If you have a cat, or eat very rare red meat, a test for toxoplasmosis infection.

Timing sexual intercourse

The most important factor when trying to conceive is to have sexual intercourse during the woman's fertile phase. This phase is recognised by a changing mucus pattern of a variable number of days, as well as the time of ovulation and the life of the ovum. New life begins when an egg (ovum) from a woman is fertilised by sperm from a man. Ovulation occurs around 14 days before the start of the menstrual period, when an egg is released from one of the ovaries. Conception occurs when the egg is met by a sperm in the fallopian tube.

Having sex in the days prior to ovulation (when the woman is aware of a slippery sensation at the vulva) and on the day of ovulation (usually the last day of the slippery sensation), increases the odds of pregnancy. Couples who have sexual intercourse around the middle or later stages of the woman's menstrual cycle may have already missed the egg, which has a short lifespan.

The 'fertile window'

Research published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2000 indicated that calendar calculations of the fertile 'window' may be unreliable. A couple needs to learn to recognise the fertile phase of the woman's cycle by being aware of the sensation at the vulva. Having intercourse on the days of the slippery sensation at the vulva increases the odds of pregnancy.

Ovulation mucus

A woman produces a particular type of mucus during her fertile phase, which can help the couple to time their sexual intercourse. The mucus, which produces a slippery sensation, is vital for sperm to survive. Other signs of fertility include a softening and swelling of the woman's external genitals (vulva). Instruction by trained teachers of the Billings method of natural family planning can help a couple to learn to identify the woman's fertile phases.

Factors which interfere with ovulation

A woman who is underweight may ovulate erratically, or not at all. Generally, a woman who weighs less than 50kg should see her doctor for advice. Ovulation can be disrupted by other lifestyle factors, including:

- **Excessive exercise** – too much exertion releases hormones that interfere with the female sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone.
- **Emotional stress** – stress affects the hypothalamus, which is the brain structure that oversees the menstrual cycle.
- **Disordered eating** – this may include crash dieting and skipping meals.

Diet

There is no special diet that improves the odds of conception, but now is the time to start eating a healthier range of foods including fresh fruits, vegetables and lean meats. There is no evidence to support the theory that taking supplements of vitamin C boosts fertility.

It is recommended that women increase their intake of folate for a few months prior to conceiving and throughout the first few weeks of pregnancy, since this B-group vitamin has been found to reduce the risk of certain birth defects. Good sources of folate include leafy green vegetables. Folate supplements are also recommended.

Cigarettes and alcohol

Cigarettes, marijuana use and alcohol are not only harmful to a developing baby, but can interfere with fertility. Quitting cigarettes will improve your overall health and your odds of conception. A woman who is trying to conceive should strictly limit her consumption of alcohol and avoid binge drinking completely.

Fertility problems

A couple isn't suspected of fertility problems until they have tried and failed to conceive for one year. Around 40 per cent of fertility problems are female and 40 per cent are male. The remaining difficulties are caused by unknown factors.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Billings LIFE Leaders In Fertility Education Tel. (03) 9802 2022 or 1800 335 860
- Family planning clinic
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100

Things to remember

- Knowing when you ovulate increases your chance of pregnancy.
- Having sex in the days prior to ovulation, when the slippery mucus is present, and on the day of ovulation itself increases the odds of pregnancy.
- Keeping a chart of the woman's cycle according to the Billings method may help to alert her doctor to any potential problems that may be affecting her fertility.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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