
Conceiving a baby

Summary

- Knowing when you ovulate increases your chance of pregnancy.
 - Having sex in the few days leading up to ovulation, when slippery mucus is present, and on the day of ovulation increases the odds of pregnancy.
 - Age affects your chance of having a healthy baby.
 - Being overweight or obese and smoking reduces the quality of eggs and sperm and your chance of pregnancy.
 - For people who want to have a baby, a healthy lifestyle improves the chance of pregnancy.
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Most women under the age of 40 years who want to become pregnant (conceive) will achieve this within 12 months of starting to try. Here we explain how you can improve your chances of getting pregnant and having a healthy baby.

Planning for a baby

If you are planning to become pregnant, it is a good idea to see your GP for a pre-conception health check-up.

A pre-conception health check-up usually includes:

- a medical history and a general examination
- blood tests to check your haemoglobin level, blood group, immunity for German measles (rubella) and chickenpox (varicella), hepatitis B and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- tests for any sexually transmissible infection (STI)
- advice about lifestyle modification that will improve the chance of pregnancy and the health of the baby (lifestyle factors you may need to modify include your weight, alcohol consumption, recreational drug use, and whether you smoke)
- advising you to take folate and iodine supplements before conception and during pregnancy for the health of your baby
- referral to a specialist if either parent has a pre-existing medical condition that might affect the chances of pregnancy, or pregnancy health
- a review of any prescription medicines either parent may be taking
- referral for genetic counselling where appropriate
- information about health services and choices of pregnancy care.

Your Fertility has some useful fact sheets about how to best prepare for pregnancy.

Timing and conception

To conceive you need to have sex in the five days before you ovulate, or on the day you ovulate. This is called the 'fertile window'. When the fertile window occurs depends on the length of your menstrual cycle.

Most women know when ovulation is approaching because they notice changes in their normal vaginal discharge, which becomes clear and slippery. Learn more about the '**fertile window**' and work out when yours occurs.

Age, fertility and conception

The most important factor for the chance of getting pregnant and having a healthy baby is your age. Starting at about age 32, a woman's chance of conceiving starts to decline. From age 35, the fertility decline speeds up and by age 40, fertility has fallen by half.

The impact of the male's age is less dramatic, but matters too. Men aged 45 and older are less fertile and some health conditions are more common in children with older fathers.

Find out more about [the effects of age on fertility and pregnancy health](#).

Weight, fertility and conception

Being overweight or underweight can cause hormonal changes that interfere with ovulation and reduce your fertility. Women who are obese take longer, on average, to conceive than women in the healthy weight range and are more likely to experience infertility.

In men, obesity can lower fertility. This is likely due to a combination of factors including hormone problems, problems with erection or other health conditions linked to obesity.

Find out more about [the effect of weight on fertility and pregnancy health](#). Your Fertility also has a [fact sheet on weight and reproductive outcomes](#).

Diet, exercise and conception

There is no special diet that improves the odds of conception, but a healthy range of foods that includes lots of fresh fruits, vegetables and lean meats is recommended.

Vitamins and minerals (micronutrients) are essential for the body to function. Read more about the [benefits of vitamins and minerals for fertility and pregnancy health](#), including folic acid, iodine, vitamin D, zinc and selenium supplements.

Regular exercise also improves fertility. Australian and international guidelines recommend you do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity – such as brisk walking, gardening or dancing – on most but preferably all days of the week. If possible, do some vigorous activity – such as running, fast cycling or fast swimming – every week as well.

For men and women who are overweight or obese, exercise can help to prevent further weight gain or achieve a modest weight loss that improves general health and fertility.

As part of weight management, international guidelines recommend that overweight or obese adults perform 225–300 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise every week (about 35–45 minutes per day).

Tobacco, alcohol and other drug use and conception

If you use tobacco, alcohol or other drugs your chances of becoming pregnant are reduced. If you become pregnant and continue to smoke, drink alcohol or use other drugs, it can affect the health of your baby at birth and into adulthood.

Smoking and pregnancy

Smoking in pregnancy or exposure to second-hand smoke reduces fertility and increases the risk of pregnancy complications. To improve your own health and give your baby the best start in life, quit smoking before you try for a baby, and encourage your partner to do the same.

Quitting smoking can be very difficult, but there is help available. Read about the [benefits of quitting](#) and visit [Quit](#) for advice about how to kick the habit.

Alcohol and pregnancy

Alcohol can reduce both male and female fertility; even drinking lightly can reduce the likelihood of conception. In men, alcohol can impair fertility because it can cause impotence, reduce libido and affect sperm quality.

It is not clear what effect drinking small amounts of alcohol can have on unborn babies, but it is well known that high alcohol consumption can be harmful. The more alcohol consumed, the higher the risk to the unborn baby.

Binge drinking (more than six standard drinks on one occasion) can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, small birth weight, and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Drug use and pregnancy

Prescription medication and recreational drug use can potentially affect the health of the foetus. A pharmacist or doctor should be consulted about any drug use.

Having trouble conceiving?

If you haven't conceived within 12 months, there may be a fertility problem. About one in seven couples in Australia experiences infertility.

Fertility difficulties can be due to:

- female fertility problems (about 40 per cent)
- male fertility problems (about 40 per cent)
- both male and female fertility problems (about 10 per cent)
- unknown cause (about 10 per cent).

Female fertility problems include:

- problems with ovulation, including polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- blocked fallopian tubes
- endometriosis
- age over 35.

Male fertility problems include:

- poor sperm quality
- blockage of the spermatic cord, which is the tube that transports the sperm from the testis to the penis.
Common causes are vasectomy, infection and some sexually transmitted infections
- ejaculation disorders
- age over 45.

If you are experiencing difficulty becoming pregnant, talk with your GP who can refer you for tests to find out the cause of your problem. Find more information about causes of infertility and treatment options from the **Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority**.

Where to get help

- Your GP
- **Your Fertility**
- **Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority** Tel (03) 8601 5250
- **Direct Line** – drug and alcohol counselling, information and referral service Tel. 1800 888 236
- **Alcohol and Drug Foundation** Tel: 1300 85 85 84
- **Women's Alcohol and Drug Service**, the Royal Women's Hospital Tel. (03) 8345 3931
- **Quitline** Tel. 13 7848

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