Summary

- Being overweight or underweight can affect a woman’s fertility by causing hormonal imbalances and problems with ovulation.
- In men, obesity can lower fertility.
- Obesity in both women and men significantly increases the risks of infertility and pregnancy complications.
- Compared with women in the healthy weight range, women who are carrying extra weight take longer to conceive.

Please note: This page is about losing weight before getting pregnant. If you’re already pregnant and want to lose weight it’s important to talk to your GP or a dietitian first.

Most people know that being overweight or obese increases the risk of health problems such as heart disease and diabetes. But many are unaware that this also reduces fertility and the chance of having a healthy baby. If you are trying to get pregnant, or plan to start trying, the closer you are to a healthy weight, the greater your chance of conceiving (getting pregnant) and having a healthy baby.

Ideal weight for conception varies

The ideal weight for conception depends on how tall you are. Your body mass index (BMI) is a number based on your height and weight. The healthy BMI range is between 18.5 and 24.9. Adults with a BMI between 25 and 29 are considered overweight and a BMI over 30 indicates obesity. You can find out what your BMI is using our BMI tool.

Overweight and fertility

Being an unhealthy weight can affect a woman’s fertility by causing hormonal imbalances and problems with ovulation (releasing an egg from the ovaries). Obesity is also associated with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a common cause of low fertility or infertility.

Being very overweight or obese can also reduce a man’s fertility. This is likely due to a combination of factors including hormone problems, problems with erection and other health conditions linked to obesity.

For men, reaching a more healthy weight at least three months before conception can improve the chance of conception. This is because sperm take about three months to develop and being in the healthy weight range during this time helps develop healthy sperm.

Overweight and pregnancy health

The environment in which eggs and sperm develop can affect the future baby’s health, and obesity can harm this environment. Getting closer to a healthy weight before conception increases the chance of the baby being healthy at birth and into adulthood.

Obesity and excess weight gain during pregnancy is also linked with a number of pregnancy complications. These include increased risk of miscarriage, high blood pressure, pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes, infection, blood clotting, the need to induce labour, caesarean birth and stillbirth.

Babies born to very overweight mothers have an increased risk of childhood and adult obesity and other long-term health problems.

A small weight loss can improve fertility and pregnancy health

While the facts about obesity and reproductive outcomes can seem daunting, there is some good news. In women who are obese, even a small weight loss improves fertility and pregnancy health. Also, some dietary and lifestyle changes that limit weight gain during pregnancy can improve health outcomes for both mother and baby.

Getting ready for pregnancy

If you are planning to get pregnant, starting a healthy eating and exercise plan now improves your chances of getting pregnant and having a healthy baby. By making healthy changes to your diet and increasing your daily physical activity, you’ll be taking steps toward reaching a more healthy weight.

Tips for a healthier weight before pregnancy

Try these steps to a healthier weight:

- Swap sugary drinks and alcohol for water.
- Eat fast food less often and make healthier choices when you can. Make half your plate vegetables at lunch and dinner.
- Use a smaller plate to help reduce your portion sizes.
- Get moving every day. Fit in regular physical activity like walking to the shops, taking the stairs and walking with a friend.
- Spend less time sitting by getting up regularly while using a computer or mobile device, and swapping screen time for other activities.
- Choose healthy snacks like fruit, low-fat yoghurt or a small portion of plain nuts. Choose reduced-fat dairy and lean meat.
• Set a realistic weight goal. It can help you feel motivated and active. Aiming for weight loss of half to one kilogram per week is a good goal.
• Start a healthy eating and exercise plan together with your partner to increase the chance of getting pregnant and having a healthy baby.

Making these lifestyle changes will make a difference to your overall health, even if they don’t lead to weight loss. Begin making these changes before you start trying to conceive, and keep them up throughout your pregnancy and beyond.

Remember, if you’re already pregnant and want to lose weight it’s important to talk to your GP or a dietitian first, before you start making any lifestyle changes.

Underweight and fertility

Being underweight (BMI under 18.5) can reduce a woman’s fertility by causing hormone imbalances that affect ovulation and the chance of getting pregnant. Compared to women in the healthy weight range, underweight women are more likely to take more than a year to get pregnant. If you are underweight and trying to conceive, a dietitian can work with you to change your diet and help you put on weight.

Where to get help

• Your GP
• Accredited practicing dietitian
• Your Fertility

References

• Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). Your Fertility.
• Are you Underweight?. Dietitians Association of Australia.
• Weight and reproductive outcomes. 2015, Pre-Conception Health Special Interest Group and Your Fertility.
• Parenting begins before conception. 2015, The Fertility Society of Australia Special Interest Group.
• The role of exercise in improving fertility, quality of life and emotional wellbeing. 2016, The Fertility Society of Australia: Pre-Conception Health Special Interest Group and Your Fertility.
• Thinking about having a baby. 2015, Your Fertility.
• How to get ready to be a dad. 2016, Fertility Society of Australia: Pre-Conception Health Special Interest Group and Your Fertility.

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More information

Reproductive system - female

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Female reproductive system explained
- Menstruation and ovulation
- Menopause
- Fertility, pregnancy and childbirth
- Breast
- Fallopian tubes and ovaries
- Uterus and cervix
- Pelvis, vagina and vulva
- Reproductive and contraception

Female reproductive system explained

- Androgen deficiency in women
  Androgen deficiency in women and its treatment is controversial, and more research is needed...
- DES daughters
  If your mother took DES while she was pregnant with you, then you are a DES daughter or DES son...
- Health checks for women
  A woman at high risk of a particular disease should be checked more frequently and/or at an earlier age...
- Pelvic floor
  Pelvic floor exercises are designed to improve muscle tone and prevent the need for corrective surgery...
- Pregnancy stages and changes
  It’s helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings...

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Puberty
Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

Reproductive system
New life begins when a male sex cell (sperm) fertilises a female egg (ovum) within the female reproductive system.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Transvaginal mesh
Transvaginal mesh has been used for more than 20 years to manage problems for women such as prolapse and incontinence. While this treatment is successful for many women, some unfortunately have...

Menstruation and ovulation

Menstrual cycle
The menstrual cycle is complex and is controlled by many different glands and the hormones that these glands produce.

Menstruation - abnormal bleeding
Heavy or abnormal periods may be an indication of other health problems.

Menstruation - amenorrhoea
Some women are more at risk of amenorrhoea (the absence of periods) because of emotional stress or changes in weight.

Menstruation - athletic amenorrhoea
Women who are athletes or who exercise a lot on a regular basis are at risk of developing athletic amenorrhoea, which is the absence of periods.

Ovulation
The female body shows several signs of ovulation and you may experience some or all of these signs.

Ovulation pain
Ovulation pain is usually harmless, but can sometimes indicate various medical conditions such as endometriosis.

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)
Most menstruating women have some form of premenstrual syndrome (PMS).

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS)
If you think you could have toxic shock syndrome, stop using tampons immediately and go to the emergency department of your nearest hospital.

Menopause

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and menopause
Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can reduce menopausal symptoms, but the benefits and risks need to be considered carefully.

Menopause
Menopause is a natural occurrence and marks the end of a woman's reproductive years.

Menopause and complementary therapies
The use of complementary therapies to manage menopausal symptoms is popular, but the sources of information available to consumers are of variable quality and reliability.

Menopause and osteoporosis
Regular weight-bearing exercise and maintaining a diet rich in calcium from childhood will help reduce bone loss at menopause.

Menopause and sexual issues
Menopause, the final menstrual period, is a natural event that marks the end of a woman's reproductive years.

Menopause and weight gain
Weight gain at menopause can be managed using healthy eating and exercise; HRT may also be beneficial.

Premature and early menopause
The symptoms of premature or early menopause are the same as for menopause at any age.

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**Fertility, pregnancy and childbirth**

- **Abortion**
  
  All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions.

- **About pregnancy and birth services in Victoria (video)**
  
  Victoria’s pregnancy, birth and maternal services, help from planning a pregnancy through to giving birth and caring for a newborn.

- **Age and fertility**
  
  Age affects the fertility of both men and women, and is the single biggest factor affecting a woman’s chance to conceive and have a healthy baby.

- **Assisted reproductive technology – IVF and ICSI**
  
  IVF (in-vitro-fertilization) and ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection) are assisted reproductive treatment (ART) procedures in which fertilisation of an egg occurs outside the body.

- **Contraception after an abortion**
  
  Whether you have a surgical or medical abortion you can become fertile again very soon after the abortion, so it's important to start using contraception immediately if you wish to prevent any...

- **Contraception - choices**
  
  The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships.

- **Ectopic pregnancy**
  
  Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube.

- **Endometriosis - know the facts (video)**
  
  Learn some facts about endometriosis. We debunk some myths and explore symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options for women.

- **Infertility in women**
  
  The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation are approximately one in five every month.

- **Miscarriage**
  
  A range of feelings is normal after a miscarriage, and they often linger for some time.

- **Molar pregnancy**
  
  Most molar pregnancies are diagnosed when bleeding early in pregnancy prompts an ultrasound scan.

- **Placental abruption**
  
  Placental abruption means the placenta has detached from the wall of the uterus, starving the baby of oxygen and nutrients.

- **Placenta previa**
  
  Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by.

- **Pregnancy - obstetric emergencies**
  
  An obstetric emergency may arise when a woman is pregnant, or during her delivery. In this case, extra care is needed. A woman may need a lot of tests and treatments, and extended hospital stays. She...

- **Pregnancy - pre-eclampsia**
  
  There is no evidence that pre-eclampsia is caused by emotional stress, working too hard or not getting enough rest.

- **Pregnancy stages and changes**
  
  It’s helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings.

- **Pregnancy testing**
  
  Sometimes, a home pregnancy test may be positive when a woman isn’t pregnant.

- **Twins - identical and fraternal**
  
  Multiple births are more common due to the advancing average age of mothers and the rise in assisted reproductive techniques.

- **Weight, fertility and pregnancy health**
  
  Compared with women in the healthy weight range, women who are carrying extra weight are less likely to conceive.
Breast

- Breast awareness
  Women should become familiar with the normal look, feel and shape of their breasts, so they will notice any abnormal changes.

- Breast cancer
  Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Australian women.

- Breast cancer and oestrogen
  There are different types of breast cancer, and around 70 per cent are sensitive to the female sex hormone oestrogen.

- Breast conditions other than breast cancer
  The vast majority of breast changes are not breast cancer, but you should always see your doctor if you notice changes in your breasts.

- Breastfeeding
  Breastfeeding positioning and attachment come naturally to some babies and mothers, but many need time and practice to get it right.

- Breast implants and mammograms
  Most women who have breast implants will be able to have regular screening mammograms.

- Breast implants and your health
  Complications can occur with all types of breast implants, but recent improvements have made breast implants safer.

- Breast implants (augmentation)
  Breast implants are inserted under the skin to create larger breasts.

- Breast reduction for women
  Breast reduction surgery removes excess breast fat, glandular tissue and skin to achieve a breast size in proportion with your body.

Fallopian tubes and ovaries

- Ectopic pregnancy
  Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube.

- Endometriosis - know the facts (video)
  Learn some facts about endometriosis. We debunk some myths and explore symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options for women.

- Fallopian tube cancer
  Fallopian tube cancer is one of the rarest gynaecological cancers.

- Ovarian cancer
  Many women with early stage ovarian cancer may not have any symptoms.

- Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)
  Polycystic ovarian syndrome is a hormonal condition associated with irregular menstrual cycles, excess hair growth, acne, reduced fertility, and increased risk of diabetes and mood changes.

- Pregnancy - obstetric emergencies
  An obstetric emergency may arise when a woman is pregnant, or during her delivery. In this case, extra care is needed. A woman may need a lot of tests and treatments, and extended hospital stays. She...

- Pregnancy stages and changes
  It’s helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings.

- Salpingitis
  Salpingitis is one of the most common causes of female infertility and may permanently damage the fallopian tubes.

Uterus and cervix

- Cervical cancer
  All women aged between 25 and 74 are advised to have Cervical Screening Tests every 5 years, new tests help identify HPV or cervical cancer.
Cervical screening tests
The cervical screening test protects up to 30 per cent more women than the Pap test.

Contraception - vaginal ring
The vaginal ring works in a similar way to the oral contraceptive pill to prevent pregnancy.

Endometriosis
Endometriosis is a painful condition that may be treated with medications or surgery.

Endometriosis - know the facts (video)
Learn some facts about endometriosis. We debunk some myths and explore symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options for women.

Fibroids
Fibroids do not cause any problems, but they are occasionally associated with infertility, miscarriage and premature labour.

Prolapsed uterus
The pelvic floor and associated supporting ligaments can be weakened or damaged in many ways, causing uterine prolapse.

Retroverted uterus
Painful sex may be caused by a retroverted uterus.

Uterine cancer
Uterine cancer is one of the most common gynaecological cancers.

Uterine inversion
Uterine inversion means the placenta fails to detach from the uterine wall, and pulls the uterus inside-out as it exits.

Pelvis, vagina and vulva

Bacterial vaginosis
Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is caused by an imbalance of the bacteria normally present in the vagina.

Bladder prolapse
Bladder prolapse is when the bladder bulges into the vagina.

Cosmetic genital surgery - labiaplasty and phalloplasty
Cosmetic genital surgery involves reshaping the labia, vulva or penis to alter their size or shape.

Cysts
Cysts may be as small as a blister or large enough to hold litres of fluid.

Female genital cutting or circumcision (FGC)
Female genital cutting or circumcision (FGC) involves the cutting or altering of the external female genital organs.

Labial adhesions
Labial adhesions are more common during the nappy years, but poor hygiene may be a cause in older girls.

Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)
Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) occurs when an infection spreads from the vagina to the cervix and fallopian tubes.

Rectocele
A rectocele is when the rectum protrudes into the vagina.

Vaginal bleeding - irregular
If you suffer from ongoing vaginal bleeding problems, see your doctor.

Vaginal cancer
Some vaginal cancers have no symptoms in their early stages, and only cause symptoms once they have invaded other parts of the body.

Reproductive and contraception

Assisted reproductive technology – IVF and ICSI
IVF (in-vitro-fertilization) and ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection) are assisted reproductive treatment (ART) procedures in which fertilisation of an egg occurs outside the body...

- Caesarean section
  A caesarean section is usually performed when it is safer for the mother or the baby than a vaginal birth...

- Contraception – tubal ligation
  Sterilisation is a permanent method of contraception that a woman can choose if she is sure that she does not want children in the future...

- Dilatation and curettage (D&C)
  A dilatation and curettage (D&C) is an operation performed on women to lightly scrape away the womb lining...

- Endometriosis - know the facts (video)
  Learn some facts about endometriosis. We debunk some myths and explore symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options for women...

- Hysterectomy
  The conditions that prompt a hysterectomy can often be treated by other means, and hysterectomy should only be a last resort...

Related Information

- Age and fertility
  Age affects the fertility of both men and women, and is the single biggest factor affecting a woman’s chance to conceive and have a healthy baby...

- Infertility in women
  The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation are approximately one in five every month...

- Assisted reproductive technology – IVF and ICSI
  IVF (in-vitro-fertilization) and ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection) are assisted reproductive treatment (ART) procedures in which fertilisation of an egg occurs outside the body...

- Infertility in men
  A couple isn’t suspected of fertility problems until they have tried and failed to conceive for one year...

- Abortion
  All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions...

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- Jean Hailes Foundation for Women’s Health
- LiveLighter – Top tips

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