

# Making BABIES

If your plans for 2008 include becoming pregnant, try Lynda Wharton's 10 tips to help boost your fertility – naturally



{ These days, we want it all – a booming career, a beautiful home, overseas travel... oh, and a baby or two. Our desire to tick all the boxes has led to increasing numbers of couples delaying the decision to reproduce until their mid-30s or beyond. This is a time when female fertility has already plunged, greatly reducing the ability to conceive naturally. So, here are 10 tips for conception:

## 1. Be slim, but not too slim... and fit, but not too fit!

Carrying as little as 10% too much body fat can impact on both male and female fertility. However, while obese women are less fertile than their slimmer peers, very thin women also show reduced fertility, compared to women carrying a healthy percentage of body fat.

Being underweight tends to reduce oestrogen levels. And overweight women sometimes experience excessively high oestrogen production, with abnormally low progesterone levels. So, losing even a small amount of weight, if you're carrying a bit too much, can encourage an improvement in the regularity of ovulation. In men, too, both obesity or a low Body Mass Index can reduce the quality and quantity of sperm production.

Obese women also often suffer from insulin resistance. This, along with the increased production of oestrogen from abdominal fat cells, can lead to a reduction in the frequency and regularity of ovulation.

When it comes to exercise and fertility, it is definitely possible to have too much of a good thing. Studies show that women undergoing IVF treatment, who exercise aerobically for four or more hours a week, have a 50% reduced success rate, compared to women who don't exercise at all! For men, exercising aerobically for long periods of time can lead to a rise in the scrotal temperature, reducing the production of sperm.

## 2. Banish chemicals

Our planet is awash with petro and agro chemicals, many of which have proven effects on male and female fertility. Organochlorines are especially damaging to fertility, as a result of their oestrogenic effects. Once we are exposed to them, we store them for years to come in the fat cells of the body, where they can disrupt both the male and female endocrine (hormonal)

systems. They are linked to reproductive damage, abnormal sex hormone levels, abnormal sperm and low sperm counts, poor sperm motility, infertility, and increases in rates of miscarriage, stillbirth and congenital birth defects.

So, if you are planning on conceiving, avoid organochlorine, pesticide and heavy metal exposure as much as possible.

That means choosing organic foods; installing a water filter for chlorine-free water; avoiding many common household chemicals, including bleach, detergents, disinfectants and garden chemicals; choosing safety-conscious personal care products free of parabens and phthalates; and avoiding plastics and cling wrap for food preparation and storage.

## 3. If it gives you a buzz... give it the flick

Whether your buzz of choice is alcohol, a cigarette or 10, or a few puffs on a marijuana joint, if you're planning a baby, the buzz has definitely got to go. And that applies to both the male and the female parts of the equation.

Tobacco contains numerous toxins, and its smoke contains more than 4000 different poisons. Male smokers suffer numerous fertility-related consequences, including lower testosterone levels, decreased sperm production, lowered sperm count and reduced motility. Then, of course, there are the cardiovascular consequences of smoking, which may include erectile dysfunction.

Marijuana is equally damaging to fertility, causing reduced testosterone levels, lowered libido, erectile dysfunction and reduced sperm count. Female users may experience irregular menstrual cycles, and the risk of foetal birth defects is elevated.

There's more bad news on the subject of your favourite tittle. When it comes to light to moderate alcohol consumption and fertility, confusion remains as to just how damaging a glass or two of alcohol a day may be for your fertility. With no safe alcohol level determined for pregnancy, and some studies suggesting that even moderate alcohol use can impair both male and female fertility, the best bet is to swear off alcohol for three months before trying to conceive.

## 4. Superboost your diet

A fertility-boosting diet is high in antioxidant-rich fresh fruits and vegetables. Load up on antioxidant super-foods such as garlic, onions, turmeric, berries, dark green leafy vegetables, and green tea. Protecting sperm from free radical damage is especially important – high levels of free radicals are found in the semen of nearly half of all infertile men.

An adequate protein intake is also vital for conception, with fish being an excellent choice at least three times a week. Choose oily fish, high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, sardines, herrings and mackerel. Keep tuna to a minimum, because of its potential for mercury contamination. Choose organic meats, eggs and dairy products to reduce exposure to organochlorine pesticides.

Dietary fats can work for or against your endeavours to conceive. Avoid too many saturated (animal) fats and trans-fats (snack foods, chips, French fries, commercially baked goods). These can change the fatty acid composition of the membranes covering the head of the sperm, making them more likely to clump and less able to swim. Choose healthy omega-3 and omega-9 fats instead, such as oily fish, avocado, nuts and seeds, olive and rice bran oil.

Boost your dietary intake of vitamins C (fruits and vegetables), E (wholegrains and wheatgerm), zinc (shellfish and seeds), and essential fatty acids (healthy fats, as above). Keep caffeine to a minimum, with no more than one to two cups of coffee or tea a day, and watch out for caffeinated soft drinks and chocolate, too.

## 5. Herbs and supplemental fertility boosters

Nutritional supplements are definitely not a substitute for a great diet, but they can certainly make a useful fertility-boosting addition. Essential fatty acids, vitamins A, C and E, B complex vitamins, and the minerals zinc, magnesium and selenium, each play a part in the normal functioning of both the reproductive and hormonal systems.

Herbal medicine has a long tradition of fertility-boosting herbs, including black cohosh, red raspberry leaf, Korean and Siberian ginseng, maca, chaste tree, and dang guai, to name a few. Always seek professional guidance for a herbal or supplemental programme.

## 6. Don't worry... be happy

Is there a link between stress and infertility? Yes, it certainly seems so, although understanding the mechanism behind this is still a little way off. Most likely, elevated levels of the stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine will have something to do with the decreased fertility seen in both men and women under pressure. It is also thought that stress may reduce the blood flow to the uterus, downgrading the quality of the endometrium (uterine lining).

In IVF studies, women who reported the highest levels of stress in their life produced 20% fewer eggs than unstressed women, and were 20% less likely to achieve success with implantation. So, make some big decisions to limit your stress. It may mean moving to part-time work or stopping work altogether. Actively de-stress with regular exercise, meditation, yoga, tai chi, or self-hypnosis.

## 7. Timing is everything

A human egg lives for a mere 24 hours after ovulation. Sperm fare better, but still only live three to five days once ejaculated into the vagina. That means your window of opportunity for conception is very small each month.

How do you know when you're ovulating? There are numerous methods to help you pinpoint your fertile time. Contact Natural Family Planning for advice on identifying the right moment by mucous and temperature. From the pharmacy, you can purchase urine tests to pinpoint ovulation, and now there is a tiny microscope the size of a lipstick that you can use to view your mucous and watch the changes leading up to ovulation.

## 8. Position yourself

When it comes to making babies, not every position in the karma sutra is appropriate! The aim is to ejaculate the sperm as closely as possible to the opening of the cervix. Therefore, the most effective position is the missionary position – face-to-face, with the man on top – with a few pillows under the woman's buttocks to tilt the pelvis. The woman should then stay on her back without moving for 20 minutes to allow sperm the best start on their Herculean journey.

## 9. Cool down

Happy, healthy sperm need a cool scrotum to live in, which is exactly why nature designed testicles to hang down, away from the warmth of the body. So, in your quest to conceive, avoid all those things that overly heat the testicles.

That means tight briefs and jeans need to go, to be replaced by boxer shorts and loose-fitting trousers or shorts. Avoid saunas, hot baths and spas, or if you just can't resist, limit their use to no more than six minutes, followed by a cool blast of water on the testicles.

## 10. Balance for babies

Take some time to visit a traditional Chinese acupuncturist for an assessment of your qi (chi) and blood. In order to conceive, it is vital that these two energies are strong and balanced. Acupuncture can regulate menstrual cycles, as well as increasing the production and motility of sperm.