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Tips for Conceiving Naturally



There are a number of things to consider when trying to conceive. It helps to take a good look at the way you live, and to work towards being as fit and healthy as possible. Ideally, to maximise your chances of producing a healthy baby you should both start to prepare at least three months before you conceive. Specifically, try to look at five main areas: your general health and fitness, your nutritional health, your reproductive health, your emotional and psychological health and, finally, the way you manage stress.

General health and fitness

Good general health and fitness will help to ensure that a man's sperm are in optimum condition and that a woman's body is well prepared to cope with the demands of pregnancy.

- Health concerns: Discuss any chronic illness or prescribed drugs with your GP or medical specialist. Men should also discuss any health issues with their GP.
- Weight: A woman's body mass index (BMI)¹ should ideally be between 20 and 25. If it is too high or too low, this will affect your hormone balance and menstrual cycles and can interfere with ovulation. Men who are overweight may have reduced sperm quality. A fertility nutritionist can help you to achieve your ideal weight and body fat percentage.
- Exercise: There are many physiological and psychological benefits to exercise. Regular exercise helps with weight control, managing stress, encouraging restful sleep, and combined with a healthy diet can help to optimise your chances of conception. Any exercise you enjoy is fine, but avoid exercising to exhaustion. Excessive exercise affects a woman's hormone balance causing irregular cycles and may prevent ovulation. A man's sperm quality can be affected by excessive exercise such as marathon running or long-distance cycling. If you have any concerns about your fitness or exercise regime, see a personal trainer for a fitness assessment and tailor-made exercise programme.
- Sperm health: For optimum sperm production, a man's testicles need to be below body temperature, so men should avoid any prolonged exposure to heat, from saunas, jacuzzis, steam rooms, hot tubs or hot baths. The heat generated by long-distance driving, laptops, and hot tubs have also been shown to affect sperm quality.

¹ Calculate BMI by taking your height in metres & dividing it by your weight in kg; or use a BMI calculator.

Nutritional preparation

There is increasing evidence that good nutrition plays an important part in optimising conception and ensuring a healthy pregnancy and healthy baby. Some lifestyle factors can adversely affect fertility for both men and women. Any changes to diet or lifestyle take about 3 months to have an effect - the time taken for sperm production and egg recruitment and maturation. Good nutrition for both partners must be a priority as it impacts on every aspect of your health and well-being. Your acupuncturist may recommend you have a fertility Nutritional Consultation. Telephone-based nutritional consultations are available at the Zita West Clinic (at a 20% discount for clients of Affiliated practitioners) - 020 722 40017.

- Nutrition - Aim for a healthy balanced diet. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables; eat protein with each meal; avoid excessive fats or sugars. Drink at least 2 litres of water a day. Avoid all fizzy drinks.
- Multivitamins: Take a good quality preconception multi-vitamin and mineral supplement such as Zita West's Vitafem for women and Vitafem for men.
- Essential fatty acids: Eight out of ten women are deficient in docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). We recommend 2 Vital DHA a day for women. These are important for the development of the foetal brain.
- Folic acid: If you choose not to take extra supplements, just make sure you are getting enough folic acid in your everyday diet as the research clearly shows that this prevents neural tube defects, such as spina bifida. Women with chronic conditions such as epilepsy or diabetes may require a higher dose of folic acid, so speak to your GP.
- Smoking has a very serious impact on reproductive health for both men and women. For men it reduces the sperm count and affects quality including the genetic integrity of the sperm, delaying the time to conception and increasing the risk of miscarriage. For women smokers, the effect has been compared to an increase in female age of more than 10 years. It effectively ages the eggs and affects the womb lining, reducing the chances of pregnancy and increasing the risk of miscarriage, low birth weight, prematurity and birth defects. Passive smoking also affects a woman's chances of conception. Ask your GP about smoking cessation clinics or arrange a 'stop smoking' session with a hypnotherapist.
- Alcohol: Ideally both partners should avoid alcohol completely. Alcohol in excessive amounts during pregnancy is associated with permanent and devastating birth defects. Sperm quality is seriously compromised by heavy drinking. An absolute safe limit in the pre-conception time is not known, but the occasional glass of wine is unlikely to have an adverse effect. One study showed a lower pregnancy rate for couples where the man drank more than 10 units per week. Avoid alcoholic binges and remember the effect potentially lasts for up to 3 months. It is unwise to drink more than 1 or 2 units per night for women and 2 or 3 units per night for men, and not more than once or twice per week. Remember, the average bottle of wine contains 8-10 units. 1 pint of beer = 2 units. 1 shot of spirits = 1 unit.

- **Coffee:** Caffeinated drinks including coffee, tea and cola should be restricted to no more than 1 or 2 per drinks per day. There is a clear link between increasing caffeine consumption and the risk of miscarriage and low birth weight babies. Semen quality is also affected by caffeine, so men should similarly restrict caffeine. Moderate to heavy coffee drinkers have a longer time to pregnancy.
- **Recreational drugs:** In women, marijuana use can cause irregular periods and prevent ovulation. Men who smoke marijuana have less seminal fluid, a reduced sperm count and sperm which swim very fast, but too early, reducing their chances of fertilisation. Cocaine use damages all the semen parameters and its effects can be seen in the sperm for up to 2 years after use. Cocaine can result in neurological damage to the baby. Recreational drug users should ideally avoid all drugs for at least a year before conception.

Reproductive health

- **Cervical smear:** Check your cervical smear is up-to-date. If any treatment is needed, this is easier before you are pregnant.
- **Rubella:** Ensure that you are immune to rubella (German measles). Even if you had the infection as a child or had the immunisation at school, you need to have a blood test to check that you have the antibodies to rubella. If you are not immune to rubella you may need the immunisation before you get pregnant. Check with your GP or practice nurse.
- **Tests for ovulation:** Your GP can do blood tests to check that you are ovulating. These are usually done mid-way through the second half of your cycle (around day 21). Another test is usually done to check your follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) level and other hormones and blood levels on days 1-3 of your cycle. The timing of these tests is crucial. Women with irregular cycles may have problems timing the tests accurately. Your acupuncturist will be able to discuss appropriate timing of your tests for your cycle.
- **Semen analysis and male assessment:** Up to 50% of fertility problems have a contributing male problem. It is worth asking your GP to arrange a semen analysis. In many cases of sub optimal semen parameters, significant improvements can be made with changes to diet and lifestyle (e.g stopping smoking and reducing alcohol). Acupuncture has also been shown to improve sperm health.
- **More comprehensive male fertility testing and consultations with male fertility expert Dr Sheryl Homa** can also be arranged with the Zita West Clinic (20% discounted rate for clients of Affiliated practitioners).
- **Sexual health check up:** We advise all couples to have a sexual health check up. This can be done at your local genitourinary (GU) clinic at your nearest big hospital. For NHS clinics see: www.fpa.org.uk.

- **Sexual difficulties:** It is not at all uncommon for couples trying to conceive to experience pressures on their sexual relationship causing temporary sexual problems such as vaginal dryness or difficulties with erection or ejaculation. Other couples may have struggled with longer term sexual difficulties, which can affect chances of pregnancy. If you are experiencing any difficulties discuss this with your

acupuncturist who can refer you on to an appropriate practitioner or counsellor.

- **Acupuncture:** Acupuncture can help to boost natural fertility by balancing hormones, improving blood flow to the reproductive organs and boosting egg growth and the thickness of the womb lining. It can also help to improve the quality of sperm. It's really good for reducing stress too.

Psychological and emotional health

- Trying for a baby can be fun, but when faced with delays and uncertainty this can result in a sense of loss of control and increased stress at any stage of the process - from initial decision-making about having a baby; timing sex, to invasive fertility investigations and treatments. You will both react differently to delays in conception and this can create added difficulties within your relationship. Talk to your acupuncturist about how you are feeling.

- It is really important to try and stay positive and not to lose confidence in your body's ability to have a baby. Try not to slip into anxiety or negative thinking. A hypnotherapy session can help with positive visualisation and to resolve unconscious 'blocking' of fertility which may be related to past events.
- Explore relaxation techniques to find one that suits you and fits into your life easily. Try Meditation, Hatha yoga, or Tai chi.

Stress management

- Fertility problems can be highly stressful for some couples. The question about whether stress can cause infertility is still hotly debated, but there is generally no doubt that fertility delays cause stress. Learning to manage your stress can only be beneficial for your general health and well-being and possibly to optimise your fertility.

- Breathing dynamics and visualisation is an excellent way to combat stress. A good breathing technique also helps to circulate oxygen around the body and into the reproductive organs. Once you've mastered a good breathing technique, you will be able to focus your mind and cope with the stresses of life.
- Consider the main areas of stress in your life: Are you getting the work/life balance right? Acupuncture is particularly beneficial in helping you to manage stress.

- Exercise: The feel-good factor and endorphin buzz produced by regular exercise can help to alleviate stress, so make sure that regular exercise is part of your daily routine.
- Other therapies such as acupuncture, reflexology, hypnotherapy, yoga, or massage can also help to reduce stress.

Follow-up

Time can be of the essence for many couples, so while trying naturally will always be a priority, it is important that older couples do not lose valuable fertility time. Your fertility care plan should include a time-frame within which to arrange a medical consultation should conception not occur, to monitor your progress and to consider your next steps.

You may be starting to consider further investigations or treatment and a suitable gynaecologist or IVF unit. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Association: www.hfea.gov.uk keeps a database of all clinics. There are many factors to consider in choosing a good clinic, so a consultation can be helpful to discuss your choice of clinics and to arrange referral.

Tips for maximising your chances of pregnancy

- The fertile time: Many couples are not having enough sex, or not having sex at the fertile time. Conception can only occur between five days before ovulation and on the day of ovulation. Ovulation predictor kits identify the luteinising hormone (LH) surge about 24 hours before ovulation but only identify a short fertile window. The body temperature rises slightly after ovulation, but this is too late for timing sex. The cervical secretions are the best indicator. Sperm can survive in the secretions for an average of 2-3 days. The egg is only fertilisable for about 12-24 hours.
- The fertile time varies: Ovulation occurs around 14 days before the next period. This is the most constant length of the cycle, whereas the time before ovulation varies. As a woman is potentially fertile for up to a week before ovulation, plan to get the sperm there ready and waiting for the egg to be released. Aim to have sex as frequently as you both wish, but be aware that your fertile time starts as soon as you notice the sticky white secretions and continues through the time of the clearer wetter secretions (the most fertile time) and for the following three days. A chart is included to help you to identify your fertile time. This is better done fairly discreetly. Be aware of your fertile time, but try to avoid the pressures of sex on demand. Women with irregular cycles or confusing symptoms may benefit from a consultation with a fertility awareness specialist.

- **Sex frequency:** Frequent sex does not weaken sperm. The chances of conception per cycle increase from around 15% for couples having sex once a week to around 50% for couples having sex every day, (lower % for older couples). Sperm quality deteriorates if they are retained in a man's tubes for more than about 3 days, so frequent ejaculation through the cycle ensures that there are fresh healthy sperm available at the fertile time.
- **Sexual pleasure:** Enjoying sex and achieving orgasm can help conception. This may be due to the effect of the contractions during orgasm helping to 'suck up' the sperm. Many women find it easier to relax and have an orgasm when they are less stressed, such as on holiday. So if possible try to keep sex spontaneous, varied, passionate and fun.
- **Stay flat after intercourse:** When the seminal fluid is ejaculated it is a viscous consistency. This sticks to the woman's cervix, but then within a few moments, it liquefies releasing the sperm. The strong healthy sperm start to swim rapidly through the fertile secretions in the woman's cervix. The rest of the seminal fluid and the weaker and dying sperm will leak back out of the vagina about 10-15 minutes after intercourse. There is no evidence that pillows under buttocks or any other gymnastic feats will help, but it makes sense to stay flat for about 15 minutes. Avoid leaping straight out of bed, wiping or washing immediately.
- **Lubricants:** It is preferable to avoid using any additional artificial lubricants. This includes all oils, water-based gels and even saliva, as this affects sperm motility.

