



## Boosting your fertility

It's no secret that our fertility declines with age. As so many of us are choosing to delay starting a family, it is perhaps an unfortunate fact of life that our fertility peaks at about the age of 19 to 24 and often declines after the age of 30<sup>1</sup>.

The decline is quite marked over just 10 years. When trying for a baby, 75 percent of 30 year old women will get pregnant within one year. By the age of 35, that reduces to 66 percent of women who will get pregnant within one year, while by the age of 40, 44 percent will get pregnant within one year<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, many more women do go on to conceive within four years. However, to maximise your chances of conceiving as soon as possible, here are some positive steps you can take to develop a healthier lifestyle and boost your fertility.

### Kick the habit

If you're a smoker, no doubt you know you should quit. But if you're trying for a baby, there's no better reason to kick the habit.

A report on *Smoking and Reproductive Life* by the British Medical Association makes it clear exactly how seriously male and female fertility is compromised by smoking.

If you need any further motivation to give up, here are just some of the ways identified in the report that smoking can affect your fertility<sup>2</sup>.

- Men who smoke have a lower sperm count than non-smokers and their semen contains a higher proportion of malformed sperm
- Smoking damages genetic material in sperm cells and this damage can persist in embryos
- Women who smoke take longer to conceive
- Among smokers, the chance of conceiving is decreased by 10–40 percent each month
- The greater the number of cigarettes smoked, the longer a woman is likely to take to conceive
- Women who smoke are twice as likely to be infertile as non-smokers
- Men and women who smoke have a poorer response to fertility treatment.

## **Cut your alcohol intake**

You may not be entirely surprised to discover that alcohol is not a great idea if you're planning to have a baby.

Research published by the British Medical Journal<sup>3</sup> examined the effect of alcohol consumption on the chances of conception. It concluded that the probability of conception in a menstrual cycle decreased with increasing alcohol intake in women, even among those drinking five or fewer drinks a week.

With even low levels of drinking decreasing your chances of conception, the best possible approach if you're trying to conceive is to avoid alcohol altogether.

## **Maintain a healthy weight**

Maintaining a healthy weight is particularly important when you are hoping to conceive. Being either underweight or overweight can reduce your chances of conceiving, so one of the best ways to boost your fertility is to achieve a healthy weight.

### **Being thin can make you less fertile**

Your level of body fat has a direct impact on the production of gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH), which is essential for regular ovulation in women and for the production of sperm in men<sup>4</sup>.

Being very underweight can lower the production of GnRH, which can mean that ovulation becomes irregular or even stops, while also affecting the uterine lining and reducing the likelihood of successful implantation of the embryo<sup>4</sup>.

Before you take this as an invitation to pile on the pounds, bear in mind that being overweight is also damaging to your fertility.

### **Obesity lowers your fertility**

Obesity is a growing problem in the UK and is thought to be one of the leading causes of infertility. The link is so strong that women who are classed as obese are frequently prevented from having infertility treatment on the NHS until they lose weight<sup>5</sup>.

A study by the Academic Medical Center in Amsterdam showed that obesity (classed as having a body mass index of 30 or more) was directly related to reduced fertility. The higher the level of obesity, the lower the fertility level<sup>5</sup>.

The study concluded that for every extra BMI point between 30 and 35 there was a four percent drop in the rate of conception. Seriously obese women

with a BMI of more than 35 were up to 49 percent less likely to conceive compared with women with a BMI of between 21 and 29<sup>5</sup>.

### **Nutrition for peak fertility**

Good nutrition is vital to keep your fertility in tip top condition and a positive way to prepare for a healthy pregnancy. However, 74 percent of women are not getting enough nutrients from their diet, according to *The National Diet and Nutrition Survey* in 2003. In particular, 74 percent of women did not get the recommended level of magnesium, 45 percent had insufficient zinc and 84 percent did not get enough folic acid<sup>6</sup>.

### **Zinc**

Zinc is very important for fertility as it is vital for the health of sperm. Deficiency can lead to reduced volume of semen in men and increased risk of miscarriage in women<sup>7</sup>. Boost the level of zinc in your diet by including seafood, beef, lamb and toasted wheat germ.

### **Folic Acid**

Folic acid aids the healthy development of the foetus and its nervous system. Deficiency can also lead to miscarriage so if you're trying to conceive, make sure you get plenty of folic acid, which is found in leafy green vegetables, lentils, hard-boiled eggs and chicken or beef liver<sup>6</sup>. The Department of Health recommends taking a daily supplement of 400mcg of folic acid from as long as three months before you conceive and for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

### **Magnesium**

Magnesium is another important nutrient for fertility as it helps to support the function of the fallopian tubes<sup>8</sup> and deficiency of this mineral can therefore block conception. Boost your magnesium levels by adding brown rice, nuts and green leafy vegetables to your diet.

### **Avoid soy-based foods**

Higher intake of soy foods and soy isoflavones is associated with lower sperm concentration<sup>9</sup>. Such foods include tofu, textured vegetable proteins (used in vegetarian foods often to imitate meat), tempeh, soy milk, soybean oil and soy sauce.

### **Selenium**

To give your man the best fighting chance of getting you pregnant and yourself the best chance of a successful pregnancy, make sure you both get plenty of selenium, an antioxidant that's found in nuts, cereals, meat, fish, and eggs<sup>6</sup>.

### **Essential Fatty Acids**

Essential fatty acids are essential for healthy hormone functioning and for the development of healthy sperm and for the baby's brain development. These essential fats are found in oily fish, nuts and seeds.

## **Vitamin E**

Vitamin E is an antioxidant, which has been proven to boost both male and female fertility, helping to increase fertilisation rate when given to men and to reduce the decline of ovulation due to age in women<sup>6</sup>.

## **Vitamin C**

Vitamin C is another antioxidant that improves fertility in both men and women, by improving the quality of sperm quality and improving the success rate of women undergoing IVF<sup>6</sup>.

## **Summary**

- Quit the cigarettes to boost your fertility
- Cut your alcohol intake, or avoid it altogether
- Maintain a healthy weight rather than being too thin or obese
- Ensure you get enough nutrients in your diet

## **References**

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

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