

So you think you want a baby?

If you've decided that the time is right for starting a family, or adding to an existing one, you'll want to get your body into top form before you start making any definite baby plans.

Speak to your GP about having a pre-pregnancy check-up, before you start trying. Your doctor can check your blood pressure and carry out any tests you might need. They will also be able to review any regular prescriptions to make sure they are appropriate for pregnancy. It goes without saying, but you also have to stop taking the pill, ideally at least three months before you intend to conceive as it may take a few months after you stop taking it for ovulation to resume and for your periods to become regular.

Top tips for pre-pregnancy

If you're a smoker, give up straight away, and encourage your partner to do the same. Smoking is a huge risk to your health and that of any developing baby. Research shows that both men's and women's levels of fertility tend to drop when you smoke. It's also true that smoking can cause premature birth, and may affect a child's long-term health.

Cut down on alcohol, if not cutting it out completely. There are new warnings every week about how much it's safe to drink in pregnancy, and as scientists don't really know how much is safe, it's best to avoid it altogether. Drinking alcohol is also said to affect men's sperm count.

Get some exercise. Being in good physical shape can reduce stress, which will improve your chance of conception, and may make any resulting pregnancy easier.

Eat as healthily as possible. Your body needs a wide range of essential vitamins and minerals to provide it with the all of the chemicals it needs to produce the lining in the womb. If you have been on the pill for some time you could find that levels of some vitamins need to be topped up, especially vitamin B complexes. You also need to start making sure that your diet contains enough folic acid before you conceive, to help prevent spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

The best dietary sources of the B vitamins, especially B12, are:

- animal products (meat, poultry)
- yeast extracts (brewers' yeast, Marmite)

Other good sources include:

- asparagus, broccoli, spinach, bananas, potatoes
- dried apricots, dates and figs
- milk, eggs, cheese, yoghurt
- nuts and pulses
- fish
- brown rice, wheat germ, wholegrain cereals

Change your man's underwear! Apparently, one common reason for a low sperm count is that their testes get overheated, so buy in some nice loose boxers for your man and ban him from having hot baths and showers.

Take a multivitamin – did we mention folic acid? There are several different tailored multivitamins for conception and pregnancy care, so just make sure that when you choose one, it contains the recommended amount of folic acid. Folic acid is found naturally in black beans, spinach, broccoli, lentils, and orange juice, but because it's so important, it's recommended that women who want to get pregnant take a supplement just to be sure. The Department of Health recommends that all women who could become pregnant or who are planning a pregnancy should take a multivitamin which includes 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.¹

Negotiating the menstrual cycle

The menstrual cycle is a mystery to many men – and some women too. It works in the same way in all women, and understanding its complexities is one way to help work out the best times to have sex if you're trying to conceive.

Each cycle lasts from 27 – 32 days in most women, although this can vary. During this cycle, your ovaries and your brain communicate with each other using hormones.

Day One: The first day of your menstrual period (when bleeding starts) is day one of your menstrual cycle. Your ovaries produce varying quantities of the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone, but at the very start of your cycle your ovaries aren't producing very much.

The hypothalamus (a small area in the brain behind the eyes) detects that your oestrogen levels are getting low, and so the hypothalamus sends a chemical signal to the pituitary gland (a pea-sized structure at the base of the brain). This signal causes release of a hormone that stimulates your ovaries, which causes them to start to turn a follicle (an immature egg) into a mature egg. This fertility hormone is called follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH).

During each cycle your ovaries respond to FSH by starting to enlarge anywhere from eight to 15 immature eggs. The egg that matures first then starts to make hormones

of its own. These mix with the other hormones that are circulating, and this probably causes the other immature eggs to stop growing. In any one cycle, it's usually only the dominant follicle which matures completely and is released at ovulation, while the rest die. If more than one egg matures and is fertilised, it results in twins or triplets.

During the time that the egg is maturing, before ovulation, the lining of the uterus (womb) is thickening, nourished by circulating oestrogen. After ovulation, cells in the corpus luteum (egg sac) produce progesterone. Progesterone changes the thickened lining of the womb so that it is ready to be shed when you start your period.

It takes an egg around two weeks to completely mature. When the egg is almost fully matured, it starts to make more oestrogen and other hormones, which acts as a signal to the pituitary gland to release a large amount of its next fertility hormone, luteinizing hormone (LH).

Day 14 - This surge of LH then tells the ovary to release the egg, and this process is called ovulation. Within 24 to 48 hours, the follicle releases its egg and the egg makes its way into one of the two fallopian tubes. Ovulation usually happens around 14 days before the next period is due, and a newly ovulated egg can be fertilised by a sperm at any time in the next few days – potentially up to seven days after ovulation. This, obviously, is the best time for you to conceive.

If the egg is not fertilised, your period will begin as soon as the egg sac deteriorates and your progesterone levels start to drop off. On this day, your ovaries aren't very active. The hypothalamus, of course, detects that the level of oestrogen is low, and this begins the whole cycle all over again...

If you're trying to conceive, you need to work out when your next period is due, and then count back 12 to 16 days from this date. This will give you a range of days when you will probably be ovulating. If you have a regular 28-day cycle, the 14th day is often said to be the best day to get pregnant. This method only works if you have relatively regular cycles.

Getting the right multivitamins and minerals

If you're actively trying to conceive, you're probably already doing your best to make sure that you eat healthy foods, such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables which are the best sources of natural vitamins and minerals. But because it's especially important to make sure that you keep your nutrient levels as high as possible, sometimes diet alone isn't enough, so it's worth taking a specific pregnancy or pre-conception multivitamin supplement just to be sure.

It is especially important for women who can become pregnant to get enough folic acid. Folic acid, a B vitamin, helps prevent birth defects of the brain and spinal cord when taken before and very early in pregnancy. It is available in most multivitamins, as a folic acid-only supplement and in some foods.

During pregnancy you need more of some nutrients to ensure your own health and that of any potential baby, such as iron, calcium and folic acid.

How to Choose a Multivitamin

Always check the label. This will give you all the information you need to choose the right supplement for you, and the amounts of specific vitamins and minerals the supplement contains. It also tells you how many tablets to take every day, and recommended doses.

Most multivitamins typically contain at least 20 vitamins and minerals, including:

- Vitamin A
- Vitamin B6
- Vitamin B12
- Vitamin C
- Vitamin D
- Vitamin E
- Vitamin K
- Folic acid
- Niacin
- Riboflavin (Vitamin B2)
- Thiamin (Vitamin B1)
- Calcium
- Iodine
- Iron
- Magnesium
- Phosphorus
- Zinc

Most multivitamins contain at least 100% of the RDA for nearly all vitamins, but they usually don't contain 100% of the RDA for minerals. (The RDA is the amount of any vitamin or mineral that a person is recommended to consume every day.) Pregnancy is one of the most nutritionally demanding periods of a woman's life when your need for vitamins and minerals increases by up to 200%. In particular, folic acid is important to all women who may become or are in the early stages of pregnancy. It is important to remember that it is best to avoid taking any vitamin A supplements during pregnancy, as this may damage the development of your baby.

Am I pregnant?

Some women are so aware of their bodies that they start to think they might be pregnant very soon after conception, just because they 'feel different.' Most women don't notice anything straight away though, and don't pick up on any early pregnancy

symptoms until the fertilised egg attaches itself to the wall of the uterus, which happens several days after conception.

Others might not notice anything for weeks, and don't consider the possibility of pregnancy until they miss a period.

Some of the signs you might notice include:

- Tender, swollen breasts. This can feel similar to PMS, so it can be easy to miss. If you're pregnant, your breasts usually become tender to the touch, but although it's similar to how they feel before your period, most women say that the soreness is worse. This is one of the most common early pregnancy signs.
- Darkening of your areolas – the area around your nipples. If you notice that the skin around your nipples has suddenly become darker, congratulations, you may have successfully conceived.
- Needing to go to the loo more often. Another early sign - once an embryo implants and begins producing HCG, you may find yourself going to the bathroom to urinate more often.
- Implantation bleeding or cramping. About eight days after ovulation, you could experience what's called implantation spotting, which is a slight pink or brown staining, as well as some cramping. This is caused by the egg burrowing into your womb lining. You might also notice some spotting around the time you were expecting your period.
- An altered sense of taste. Some women find that their sense of taste changes in strange ways. You could notice that you have a metallic taste in your mouth, or just can't stomach strong flavours that you usually enjoy, like coffee, garlic or some spices. Food cravings can also be a sign of pregnancy. Although it's not a reliable symptom on its own, if cravings are accompanied by some of the other symptoms on this list, check your calendar.
- Fatigue. If you feel absolutely exhausted and for no apparent reason, it could be down to high levels of progesterone. Fatigue is a classic sign of early pregnancy, although not on its own.
- Morning sickness. The classic sign that all women dread. A lot of women don't experience any morning sickness until a few weeks after conception, and some lucky women get away with no morning sickness at all. It is possible that you'll start to feel nauseous or queasy within just a few days of conception, and despite the name, it's not just confined to the mornings. Pregnancy-related nausea can affect you in the morning, noon, or night. Some women experience extreme morning sickness (hyperemesis

graavidarum) which is potentially dangerous as their vomiting can become so severe that they can't keep food or liquid down.

- A missed period. Well, this is the obvious one. If your periods are normally pretty regular but this time you're late, get to the chemist and take a pregnancy test. Keep your fingers crossed...

Summary:

- If you're thinking of conceiving, visit your doctor and prepare your body in advance
- To find out the best time for conceiving, count 12-16 days back from the date of your next expected period
- Make sure that you are well nourished and consider taking a good multivitamin & mineral supplement
- Watch for the signs of early pregnancy

References:

1 – Department of Health - <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/fsa070504rev.pdf>

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

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