

Fertility fixes

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*Around one in six couples have trouble conceiving.
Charmaine Yabsley asks top holistic health experts for
their advice on improving your chances of falling pregnant.*
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1. Check his AND her health

"Parents-to-be often skip the most important part of baby-making - their own health. Genetic studies show that paternal and maternal health dictate the healthy or otherwise outcomes for their yet-to-be conceived child," says naturopath Nicky Woods. "Many health issues impact on fertility, such as iodine deficiency, a high toxin load, or even something as 'healthy' as losing five kilos. Miscarriages can be attributed to sperm health and the lack of certain nutrients - co enzyme Q 10, essential fatty acids and zinc - so this should be a consideration for all men. The principles of natural fertility management lie in removing toxic 'road blocks', reversing nutritional deficiencies, and managing stress and hormones via herbal medicine and meditation."

2. Upgrade your eating habits

"Ditch low-fat dairy," urges naturopath Katherine Maslen. "One study of over 18,000 women found that those with a high intake of low-fat dairy had a greater incidence of ovulatory infertility, including conditions like PCOS. Conversely, the study also found that full-fat dairy may actually enhance fertility. Brazil nuts are a rich source of selenium, which protects both sperm and egg cells; three to four nuts daily is a therapeutic dose. Flaxseeds are high in omega-3 fatty acids, calcium and magnesium, and research shows that eating 2 tablespoons a day will modulate oestrogen levels in the body, which is good news for fertility and cancer prevention. There is evidence that the higher your pesticide intake, the more likely you'll experience fertility issues. Switching to organic food is the easiest way to reduce endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Can't get organic? Go to www.ewg.org to see which are highest in pesticides."



3. Go chemical-free

"Conventional tampons contain endocrine-disrupting chemical residues from pesticides and bleach, which are easily absorbed through the vaginal walls," adds Maslen. "Organic tampons are better; but all tampons can stop natural menstrual flow and cause local inflammation. Opt for organic pads or use a silicone menstrual cup for optimum fertility. Many plastics contain endocrine-disrupting bisphenol chemicals like BPA, and women with high levels of BPA tend to have adverse outcomes during IVF cycles, such as lower fertilisation rates. But beware of BPA-free products: they usually contain other bisphenol chemicals which are equal to or even worse than BPA. Synthetic fragrances are one of the worst things for your fertility as they contain endocrine-disrupting phthalates which have a toxic effect on the reproductive system. As well as skipping conventional perfume, look for anything with 'fragrance' on the label - washing powder, dish liquid, hand wash, shampoo, cleaning products, scented candles, and air fresheners."

4. Get hot under the collar!

"The most natural form of male fertility enhancement is often overlooked," advises Maslen. "Studies show that ejaculating every couple of days improves all sperm parameters,

including counts, motility and morphology (that is, how awesome they are!). Another tip for men is to be aware that sperm do not like heat, which is why your testicles are located outside your body. Avoid tight-fitting underwear, riding bikes and motorbikes (especially in tight-fitting gear) and hot tubs."

5. Think holistically

"Zinc, selenium, and vitamins B5 and E can improve men's sperm quality in as little as three months," says naturopath Marta Browne. "Women - especially those with irregular hormonal cycles - can benefit from the herbs black cohosh, chaste tree, dong quai, liquorice, peonia, and wild yam. Men usually benefit most from Korean ginseng and withania, while both sexes can benefit from shatavari and tribulus. Herbs should only be taken under guidance of a qualified health professional."

6. Fake it till you make it

"Couples preparing to have a baby should 'act pregnant' sooner rather than later, in order to actually get pregnant and finally take home a healthy baby," says fertility specialist Gabriela Rosa. "The egg takes a minimum of 120 to 240 days to mature and sperm takes around 100 days to form, so it can take two to three sperm cycles for lifestyle interventions to take effect. 'Eat the rainbow' and base your meals on (ideally) certified organic vegetables and protein with good quality filtered water stored in glass bottles. Quit smoking, coffee, alcohol, commercial cleaning products, and conventional pest control. Drop excess weight, avoid excess sugar, trans fats, and junk food."

7. Try acupuncture

"Acupuncture has been scientifically shown to improve fertility in both men and women," says Dr Irene Prantalos. "It regulates hormones and promotes thickening of the uterine lining and regular ovulation of mature eggs. In men, it improves sperm quality."

"Reproductive technology is overused. There is so much you can do naturally to enhance fertility. Technology should only be a last resort."

— Dr Christiane Northrup, author of *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*

8. Follow the TCM way

"In traditional Chinese medicine, we believe we can encourage healthier sperm and eggs in people finding it hard to fall pregnant with foods that nourish Jing, or life essence," adds Prantalos. "These include: eggs, caviar (fish eggs), seeds (sunflower, sesame, pumpkin), nuts (walnuts, almonds), animal brains and kidneys, oysters, seaweed/algae, artichokes, leafy vegetables, oats, and avocado. Avoid alcohol, spicy hot foods, cold or raw foods, fatty foods, high calorie/low nutrient-type foods, sugar, dairy, and other inflammatory foods."

9. Know your cycle

"Women need to become familiar with the patterns of their menstrual cycles," explains TCM doctor Shura Ford. "In Chinese medicine, a woman's cycle reflects what is happening to the energy flow in her whole body. Discussing your observations will allow your practitioner to

assess the pattern of disharmony that needs to be addressed, using acupuncture or Chinese herbal medicine. Understanding when a woman is likely to ovulate is also crucial for optimising fertility, and by taking note of subtle observations a woman will gain more clarity about her peak fertile time."

10. Lower your load

"Conventional skincare, make-up and household cleaning products can contain hundreds of toxins, most of which disrupt hormones," warns Amy Fox. "When I see men with 'man boobs' and 'love handles', this tells me that their oestrogen levels are out of balance. Toxins like phthalates, parabens, and phenoxyethanol are proven to cause hormone disruption, which leads to oestrogen dominance in both men and women, negatively impacting their fertility."

11. Assess your lifestyle

"Nutrition and lifestyle are paramount in falling pregnant," says naturopath Jess Blair. "Eat well: choose organic, and ensure you're getting enough protein and iron. Ditch the endocrine-disrupters, including conventional home cleaning products and make-up. Keep gut health on track by taking a quality probiotic. Stress, pesticides, and herbicides all affect gut flora, which can affect conception chances too."

12. Support the swimmers

"Zinc (from oysters), selenium (Brazil nuts), and vitamin A (red capsicum) all support a healthy sperm count and sperm mobility," says naturopath Joseph Ostojic. "The herb tribulus increases libido and improves duration and frequency of erections. And eat plenty of pumpkin seeds, which are high in zinc and arginine, which improves blood flow."

13. Balance your hormones

"For women, vitex normalises hormones involved with the menstrual cycle, and shatavari works as a nourishing tonic for reproductive organs, specifically the ovaries," adds Ostojic. "Add red maca powder to regulate the menstrual cycle and improve ovulation, and spirulina, a nutrient-dense food that replenishes any deficiencies that may be present."

14. Communicate!

"It sounds obvious, but to make a baby you need a sperm and an egg - the man has just as much of a role to play as the woman," says naturopath Shonelle Siegmann. "In fact, miscarriages are more likely to be due to a male issue - such as chromosomal issues stemming from sperm quality - than a female one. So if you're on board with your pre-conception plan, but your partner isn't - it's time to have a whole-hearted discussion."

15. Go low-GI

"People often don't realise that so-called 'healthy' foods, like fruit juices and muesli bars, are high in sugar which decreases fertility," says Elizabeth Mucci. "Sugar triggers insulin production which encourages inflammation, and, over time, insulin resistance, causing weight gain, hormonal disruption, and a reduced ability to achieve pregnancy. In women with PCOS, this can stop or delay ovulation altogether. A low-GI diet is a simple way for couples to increase their odds of conception."

16. Unwind, already

"Stress increases cortisol levels and can compromise reproductive health: deadlines, long hours, poor sleep, frequent travel and a high intake of caffeine and alcohol all trigger the body's 'fight or flight' response, which jeopardises non-essential functions like fertility," adds Mucci. "Get 7-8 hours of sleep a night, and practise 15 minutes of meditation daily. Exercise is important, but make it low-intensity – think: swimming, yoga, walking, or Pilates – not high-intensity, which also promotes the fight-or-flight response. Even simple things, like slow, deep breathing exercises and taking the time to chew food properly, signal to the brain and body that we are not under threat."

17. Ask the experts

"Choose a qualified practitioner in acupuncture or Chinese medicine whose work focuses on treating infertility," advises Dr Kirk Wilson. "Studies show that couples who use acupuncture during IVF have a higher success rate of a healthy and successful pregnancy."

18. Coordinate calendars

"Also, if you are using acupuncture to assist IVF therapy, agree with your practitioner that they will give you a 100 percent assurance of their availability when treatment is most crucial - this is rarely determined at the outset of treatment, and it should not be overlooked," adds Wilson.

19. Restore balance

"Chinese medicine and acupuncture have a long history of being used to restore balance in the body, which is the approach taken with improving fertility as well," says Kim Gatenby. "By restoring balance between Yin and Yang during your menstrual cycle, you improve your odds of conception. Massaging the acupuncture point Kidney 3 (between the inner ankle bone and Achilles tendon) is traditionally thought to support Yin and Yang deficiencies from various causes."

20. Food is your medicine

"Your nutritional status at the time of conception can impact the health of a developing embryo,

* Meet our experts



Katherine Maslen is a naturopath and author of *Get Well, Stay Well*, www.katherinemaslen.com



Joseph Ostojic is a naturopath, www.formulahealth.com.au



Marta Browne is an integrative naturopath, www.martabrowne.com



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which is why it's vital to support your body prior to trying to conceive," adds Gatenby. "Australian guidelines recommend taking a prenatal vitamin containing folate for three months prior to conception. Other supplements, like coenzyme Q10 for improving sperm and egg quality, should only be prescribed by a health practitioner. My antioxidant-rich fertility smoothie recipe includes acai and maqui berry powders, plus plant-based protein powder, maca powder, and activated almond milk."

21. Be prepared

"I suggest a minimum of three months preparation before conception to boost fertility naturally, create enhanced glandular and libido balance for both mum and dad, and provide essential nutrients needed before pregnancy for the developing foetus," says Kathy Fray. "Women need folic acid, calcium, iodine, magnesium and a non-constipating form of iron to ensure complete nutritional support. For men, zinc and selenium play a vital role in improving sperm quality and motility (movement). Everyone needs a boost to their glandular system and help with their libido, so targeting these areas before conception makes sense. I recommend extract from the Peruvian root maca, to boost sexual function and enhance fertility." *