



fertility boosters

Drs Mary Birdsall and John Peek

Are you hoping to conceive naturally after IVF or having problems with conceiving your second baby? Fertility Associates offer some lifestyle changes you should consider to improve your chances of conceiving and having a healthy baby.

Folic acid and multivitamins

There is good evidence that folic acid reduces the chances of having a baby with spina bifida (when the spine does not develop normally). The recommended dose is 0.8mg of folic acid daily for two months before conceiving and until 12 weeks of pregnancy. Folic acid supplements that contain general multivitamins may also reduce the chances of cardiac, urinary and cleft lip abnormalities in babies. Vitamin A formulations should be avoided as they are linked with birth defects.

Stop smoking

Cigarettes have a huge impact on fertility. Women who smoke are only 60% as likely to conceive as non-smokers and smoking is also associated with miscarriage, small babies and earlier menopause. Smoking appears to speed up the reproductive clock sometimes by up to 10 years. Men who smoke have lower sperm counts and more malformed sperm than non-smokers and are more likely to have children who develop childhood cancer. Smoking marijuana is also thought to have a detrimental influence on sperm.

The good news is that smoking-induced damage to fertility may be reversible. Sperm take around 72 days to fully form, so if you give up smoking at least three months before trying to conceive, sperm quality should improve. Women should not smoke for at least three months before trying to conceive, as this is how long it takes for an egg to grow and mature. Nicotine patches may cause the same problems as smoking so should also be avoided.

Give up alcohol

Most people are aware of the detrimental

effects that alcohol can have on a pregnancy, by causing fetal alcohol syndrome. However, moderate drinking whilst trying to conceive also reduces fertility. If there is a safe level of alcohol in pregnancy, it is not known, so it is better not to drink at all as soon as you know you are pregnant, preferably before.

Drink less caffeine

Caffeine intake can affect fertility in women, as it is associated with a longer time to conceive and also reduced chances of becoming pregnant on an IVF programme. More than six cups of coffee a day may also be linked with miscarriage. Caffeine is not only contained in coffee but also in a variety of other products such as tea, cola, energy drinks, some frozen desserts and chocolate; so be aware of your overall caffeine intake. Male fertility does not appear to be affected by caffeine.

Maintain a healthy body weight

Being overweight or underweight can reduce fertility, so it is important to keep your body weight within the normal healthy range. Body Mass Index (BMI) is an indication of your body weight and can be calculated by dividing weight (in kgs) by height (in m²). You should aim for a BMI of between 20 and 25, as this will optimise your chances of conception.

Even in these modern times, nature knows best. If a woman's BMI falls below 19, the body senses famine and ovulation is switched off to prevent the risk of having a baby with malnutrition. Risk of miscarriage is also increased in women with a low BMI.

Being overweight (BMI>30) can reduce fertility by 50%. Pregnancy in overweight women is often associated with problems

such as maternal diabetes, high blood pressure, big babies and increased risk of caesarean section.

Reduce stress

There is some evidence that women who are clinically depressed when they start an IVF cycle are less likely to conceive. So our take home message is to look after yourself and your relationship by managing stress and seeking help if needed.

Eat healthily

The current dietary advice is to eat a healthy balanced diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables. For men, there are a number of studies suggesting that antioxidants such as vitamin C and E, along with zinc and selenium may reduce DNA damage in sperm. Foods rich in antioxidants are good for both prospective parents, and include:

- all types of berries
- fruits such as grapes, oranges, plums, pineapple, dates, kiwifruit, mandarins
- dried fruit such as apricots and prunes
- vegetables such as red cabbage, peppers, parsley, artichokes, brussels sprouts, tomatoes, spinach; brightly coloured vegetables are particularly rich in antioxidants
- legumes such as broad beans, groundnuts, soybeans
- cereals such as barley, millet, oats and corn
- nuts and seeds such as walnuts, brazil nuts, sunflower seeds
- garlic and ginger
- dark chocolate

What about medication?

It is wise to check with your doctor regarding any medication that you are both on, as there may be a better alternative while you are planning a pregnancy. For example, women taking medication for epilepsy or depression should discuss options with a medical practitioner. There are also some drugs which you may have taken in the past that may impact on fertility, particularly chemotherapy drugs.

Lubricants

Be wary of which lubricants you use when trying to conceive. 'Non-spermicidal lubricant' in fact means that they don't have any chemical spermicide (anti-sperm drugs) in them, not that they are actually non-toxic to sperm. Many lubricants are sperm toxic based on 'non-drug' ingredients such as glycerin/glycerol, propylene glycol, etc. The Pre-Seed brand is non-toxic to sperm and the only personal lubricant allowed to state that it is "safe to use when trying to conceive."

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