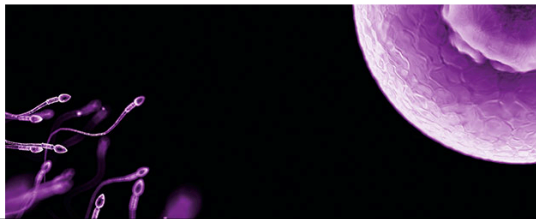


Everything you wanted to know about getting pregnant...

...but were too afraid to ask



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THE FEAR

FERTILITY SHARPLY DECLINES ONCE YOU REACH 35

The facts There's actually no magic cut-off point for motherhood. Shockingly, much of today's fertility data is based on birth records from 1700s France, and while the get-me-pregnant scales may tip in favour of 20-something women, it doesn't mean that you can't conceive problem-free in your 30s and 40s.

In a study of 780 women published in the journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 82 per cent of those aged 35–39 fell pregnant within a year of trying, compared to 86 per cent of those aged 27–34.

"The decline in fertility with age is a gradual one, and the rate of decline will be different depending on individual health circumstances," explains Dr Helen Lyall, consultant gynaecologist at Nuffield Health Glasgow Hospital.

Want to find out how well your own fertility is holding up? If you're struggling to conceive, head to your doctor's surgery, where you can have blood tests to measure your luteinising hormone, follicle-stimulating hormone and oestradiol levels – all good indicators of fertility. Your GP may also want to examine your progesterone levels to check if you're ovulating. This test is carried out on day 21 of your cycle via a blood sample. You can also choose to have a chlamydia test as this STI can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, a known cause of infertility, if left untreated. The test is performed via an internal swab or urine sample. Plus, if you suffer irregular, painful or extra-heavy periods, your doctor will be able to help rule out conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome and endometriosis, a condition where tissue that normally lines the womb grows in other areas.

THE FEAR

EATING JUNK FOOD DAMAGES YOUR CHANCES OF GETTING PREGNANT

The facts Junk food tends to be high in refined sugar, which raises insulin levels and prompts the brain's pituitary gland to release ovulation-disruptive hormones called androgens. That means it's essential to banish the naughty treats if you want to up your baby-making odds. Watch your alcohol and coffee intake, too. Even drinking lightly (one to five drinks a week) can reduce fertility, while studies show that caffeine can impair the fallopian tube muscles, which carry the eggs from the ovaries to the womb. Both alcohol and caffeine have also been linked to an increased risk of miscarriage.

Instead, choose a Mediterranean-style diet full of fresh fruit and veg, lean protein, good fats and wholegrains to nourish your body with the nutrients needed to regulate fertility hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone. These play an important role in maintaining the womb lining to support a healthy pregnancy. Load your plate with vegetables in as many colours as possible to ensure you're getting a range of nutrients, and eat plenty of dark-green veg, such as spinach, for its folic acid content. This vitamin not only supports regular ovulation, but is also proven to reduce the risk of birth defects. Plus, snacking on avocados, which are rich in monounsaturated fat, as well as zinc-loaded nuts and seeds, will keep hormones balanced.

Don't forget, a healthy diet isn't just for mums to be. Make sure your man is on the same page as you to bolster his sperm count. He should be eating at least seven portions of fruit and veg a day to give his swimmers a boost. Get him to follow your cue and nibble on nuts and seeds, as zinc is a potent sperm enhancer. "It helps to make the outer layer and tail of the sperm, and studies have shown that men who took a combination of zinc and folic acid showed a 74 per cent increase in sperm count," says women's health expert Dr Marilyn Glenville.

THE FEAR

DOING LOADS OF EXERCISE HARMS YOUR CHANCES OF HAVING A BABY

The facts Certain types of strenuous exercise, such as long-distance running, can affect ovulation as, if you burn more calories than you take in, the energy deficit can throw off your ovulatory cycle. However, average gym-goers don't need to worry, because working out can actually help the get-fertile mission. "In studies, moderate amounts of exercise have been linked to improved chances of getting pregnant," explains personal trainer Jessica Wolny. "But ovulation can be impaired if your body fat is over 35 per cent or under 12 per cent." So if you're trying to fall pregnant, getting in shape and having a healthy BMI is essential, but it probably isn't the right time to try to set a new personal best or start training for a marathon. Ditch intense workouts and make a brisk walk or a gentle swim part of your daily schedule to help prime your body for parenthood.

THE FEAR

STRESS MAKES YOU INFERTILE

The facts Constantly feeling frazzled disrupts the function of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis – the brain's complex system that is responsible for releasing female hormones – by delaying or even stopping ovulation. Feeling under pressure also turns on your body's survival mechanism, known as the "fight or flight" response, which restricts blood flow to the ovaries and uses up progesterone reserves. In fact, suffering from constant stress could double your risk of infertility according to a new study in the journal *Human Reproduction*.

"If you have a problem with stress, find ways to manage it or see a therapist at least a month before you start trying to fall pregnant," says holistic GP Dr Sohreh Roket. Acupuncture can be used to promote a more relaxed frame of mind, and it's also thought to help by improving blood supply to the reproductive organs, thereby increasing the thickness of the womb lining, according to the British Acupuncture Council. Yoga and meditation can also help manage stress.

THE FEAR

YOU MUST HAVE SEX ON A CERTAIN DAY OF YOUR CYCLE TO FALL PREGNANT

The facts Timing matters when trying for a baby, but it's a misconception that ovulation always falls on day 14 of your cycle. In fact, in an average 28-day cycle, ovulation can occur anywhere between day 10 and 17. Free apps such as Monthly Cycles, Fertility Friend and Period Tracker! are useful aids to track your most fertile time – it's best to try a few different ones as they don't always give identical results.

Making more time for fun between the sheets is a must, as regular sex will build up quality sperm. "Although it only takes one time to fall pregnant, an average of three times a week is the standard advice," says Tony Boret, consultant gynaecologist and obstetrician at Spire Bushey Hospital. But according to research, daily sex can reduce the quality of sperm.

THE FEAR

YOUR BODY COPES BETTER WITH HAVING A BABY IF YOU'RE YOUNGER

The facts Biologically speaking, it's perfectly possible to have healthy babies in your 30s and 40s, but the younger our bodies are, the more capable they are of coping with the additional strain on joints and muscles, as well as the energy-zapping impact of childbearing.

"Pregnancy can take a toll on your body, so the younger you are, the quicker you'll recover after delivery," says Dr Geetha Venkat, director of Harley Street Fertility Clinic. It's also easier to get your figure back to its pre-pregnancy glory, as your metabolism tends to slow with age, making it harder to fight the post-baby pounds if you come to motherhood later.

If youth isn't on your side, follow a healthy lifestyle in the run-up to conceiving, during and after pregnancy for the best chance of recovery. This includes eating a nutritious diet, minimising stress and cutting out vices like alcohol and smoking completely. Gentle exercise, such as walking and swimming, a few times a week will help to lower stress levels while physically conditioning your body to cope with childbirth.

THE FEAR

FREEZING YOUR EGGS DOESN'T WORK

The facts Putting your eggs on ice could potentially help you buy more time, but the age you are when your eggs are harvested is crucial when it comes to getting the best results as egg quality decreases as we get older.

"Success rates really depend on the age you were when your eggs were frozen, rather than the age you are when they are implanted. In general, if you freeze your eggs in your 20s, your chances of pregnancy are around 40 per cent – as long as there are no complications, such as uterine fibroids – regardless of the age you carry the pregnancy," says Dr Venkat. "Eggs are frozen by a relatively new method called vitrification. But only 60-70 per cent of eggs survive the freezing and thawing process, compared to around 80–95 per cent of embryos."

The egg-freezing treatment itself is minimally invasive and follows the same method as IVF, where you undergo hormone injections for 10-12 days. Eggs are then collected while you're under general anaesthetic (removing the pain factor) and placed in storage. "This takes around three hours and you can even go home the same day," continues Dr Venkat.

Be warned – it doesn't come cheap. The procedure isn't available on the NHS unless you're suffering from a serious condition, such as cancer, so you'll have to fork out an average of £3,600 for treatment, plus £1,300 for medication to stimulate the ovaries to produce mature follicles.

THE FEAR

IT'S RISKY TO HAVE A BABY OVER 40

The facts Even once you've conceived, the risk of health complications during your pregnancy does rocket as you get older.

"We know the rate of miscarriage is higher, the older you are. Our egg cells age as we do, which means there is a greater risk of fertilising an egg with chromosomal abnormalities," explains Ruth Bender Atik, director of The Miscarriage Association.

The risk of having a baby with a genetic abnormality such as Down's syndrome also increases with age, from one in 1,500 if you're 20 to one in 100 at 40+. Pregnancy at a later age also increases the possibility of pre-eclampsia, high blood pressure and gestational diabetes. Plus, labour is often longer, with a higher chance of an intervention birth such as a Caesarean delivery.

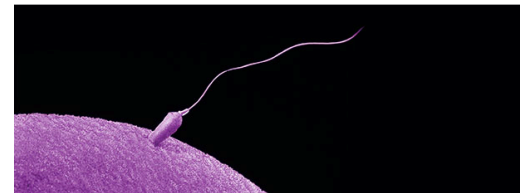
THE FEAR

HAVING AN ABORTION WILL MAKE IT HARDER TO FALL PREGNANT

The facts It's unlikely that a termination will affect your future fertility, especially if you have the procedure early in the pregnancy.

"The risk of complications to the womb during an abortion is low in the UK, and damage to the cervix, which could increase the chance of miscarriage, occurs in fewer than 10 in every 1,000 abortions," explains Sabah Baghadi, consultant obstetrician, gynaecologist and infertility specialist at BMI The Priory Hospital in Birmingham.

See your GP as soon as possible if you experience any symptoms such as prolonged bleeding, an unusual odour and changes in body temperature straight after the procedure. These could be a sign of infection, which might result in scarring of the womb lining and make implantation of the egg more difficult in the future. Mr Baghadi explains: "Treating these symptoms as soon as they occur will help to minimise fertility issues in years to come."



49% of live births in 2012 were to mothers aged 30 and over.*

28.1 was the average age of a first-time mum in 2012.*

1 in 6 couples may not conceive within a year of trying.**

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