

Boost your chance for a baby

Are your lifestyle choices sabotaging your chances to have a baby? Margaret de Silva asks the experts for their top tips to boost fertility

In spite of what you might read about celebrities having babies over 40, it's not getting any easier and senior embryologist with Monash IVF in Brisbane, Amanda Robertson, confirms that age is still the biggest factor in determining female fertility. There's no doubt that "assisted pregnancies" through IVF, artificial insemination and other treatments have spiked over the last five years but Robertson says that, as lives have become more busy and stressful, IVF clinics are seeing increasing numbers of people who are unwittingly sabotaging their chances of having a baby because of their lifestyle.

Don't delay

Brisbane's Life Fertility consultant Dr Sonya Jessup says fertility begins to steadily decrease about 13 years before the onset of menopause, which for most women will be around 37, when the number of eggs a woman produces declines. However, about 10 per cent of women will go through menopause from 45, so fertility can drop off earlier. While doctors can measure the amount of anti-mullerian hormone (AMH) in a woman's body, indicating the number of eggs and follicles in the ovaries, this is not a hard and fast way of checking fertility. If a woman is over 35 and has not conceived after six months, visit a doctor. Women with a family history of early menopause should be particularly aware.

Lose weight

With one in two Australians now overweight, obesity in both men and women has emerged as a major factor preventing conception. City Fertility medical director Dr Ashish Das says even for young women, being severely overweight or underweight can cause the body to switch off ovulation. Having a normal body mass index (BMI), exercising regularly and having a balanced diet will significantly improve

fertility outcomes. Even if a woman is ovulating, overweight women can have more difficulty implanting the embryo. Dr Sonya Jessup says that losing as little as five kilos can help an overweight woman improve her fertility.

Know your cycle

The average woman's menstrual cycle lasts 28 days, with ovulation occurring on day 14. Women with a longer cycle can count back 14 days from their period to work out the approximate day of ovulation. Dr Ashish Das suggests couples have sex one to three days before ovulation or every two days around ovulation to increase the chance of conception. Women with irregular periods will find it harder to judge when they ovulate and should consult a doctor.

Cut out toxins

Smoking during pregnancy has been linked to miscarriage and birth defects and it also decreases fertility. According to Brisbane naturopath and *Making Babies* author Jason Jackson, smoking decreases testosterone and reduces sperm quality for men, while for women, it can deplete vitamin B12 levels, disrupt cell development and contributes to tubule blockages. Amanda Robertson says heavy smoking can add up to 10 years to the age of ovaries, so a 30-year-old smoker will have the egg and embryo quality of a 40-year-old. And IVF clinics are reporting that smokers are also less likely to be able to have a baby even after fertility treatments. Robertson warns that passive smokers are as equally at risk of adverse effects as smokers.

The line is more blurred for alcohol and caffeine consumption. In her book *The Fertility Diet*, Sarah Dobbyn recommends cutting out coffee and alcohol completely, however Brisbane fertility consultants Dr Sonya Jessup and Dr Ashish Das agree that in moderation, one or two cups of coffee a day and the

occasional glass of wine will have little or no impact on fertility.

Eat super foods

In *The Fertility Diet*, Sarah Dobbyn argues that certain foods can help improve the chances of conception at any age. She recommends increasing the daily intake of antioxidants to keep cells young and healthy and singles out berries, yams, sweet potatoes and garlic for their fertility boosting properties, while also recommending green, leafy vegetables such as spinach for their high folic acid concentration. Dr Sonya Jessup agrees folic acid is important for women and also recommends increasing iodine to assist with the production of healthy eggs by adding iodised (not regular) salt to meals.

Enjoy the bedroom

Naturopath Jason Jackson says good quality sleep can restore and rejuvenate the brain and organs, including the reproductive system. Sleep also reduces stress, which can affect a couple's sex life. Dr Sonya Jessup says it's not unusual for couples to feel under pressure when they are trying to conceive. "Sex is meant to be fun," Jessup says. "If it gets to a point that it's stressful, that is the time to seek treatment. Don't lose sight of the fact that the relationship is important as well."

Seek treatment

Infertility can affect young women. Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted disease on the rise in Australia and it can damage fallopian tubes. People with thyroid conditions, diabetes, autoimmune diseases, polycystic ovarian syndrome and other medical conditions may have trouble conceiving. Women under 35 who have not fallen pregnant after a year of trying should consult a doctor.

Men can find out more about fertility health online at www.andrologyaustralia.org.

Heart warning

Each year in Australia there are more than 48,000 serious heart attacks, and 40 per cent of those are fatal. But, according to Heart Foundation Queensland health director Rachele Foreman, many people won't even recognise they are having one. Foreman says only 50 per cent of people who have a heart attack will experience the "Hollywood-style" attacks of shooting pain in the chest and arm, which is why the Foundation will launch a campaign to help people recognise the warning signs of heart attack and the importance of calling Triple Zero (000) fast during Heart Week, starting from 3 May.

Less typical symptoms of heart attack include pressure, heaviness or tightness lasting more than 10 minutes in the chest, either arm, neck, upper back or jaw. Foreman says these symptoms might also be accompanied by nausea, dizziness and shortness of breath, although not everyone will experience this.

She says the pain from a heart attack would be felt above the rib cage and can radiate to other parts of the body due to a lack of oxygen reaching the heart. Warning signs vary from person to person and may not always be sudden or severe. People with diabetes in particular may only experience mild symptoms, but the heart attack can still be serious. If anyone experiences one or a combination of symptoms, they should call 000 to speak to an operator, who will assess whether an ambulance is required. Research has shown that many people delay calling an ambulance because they would be embarrassed if it turns out they are not having a heart attack.

According to the Heart Foundation, half the number of patients suffering a heart attack will die before they get to hospital, many because they didn't get help quickly enough.

For more information about heart health see the website www.heartattackfacts.org.au.

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