

Natural Ways to Boost Your Fertility

As Thanksgiving nears, I see the various depictions of a cornucopia all around me. When I see that horn, overflowing with fruits and vegetables and I can't help but think of its origin in Greek Mythology and how the horn eventually came to symbolize female fertility. I know what you're thinking, "Who doesn't?" right?! Okay, maybe a few of you. At any rate, I see this powerful symbol of abundance and fertility and I can't help but think it is the perfect time to write about it here.

If you're trying to get pregnant, or even if you are trying to keep your body at its "most fertile" for when you do decide to start trying, there are many tips, tricks, and natural remedies to help you along in your journey. In addition to some of "the basics," I also wanted to share with you some of the more current advances in this area, such as herbal remedies, newfangled gadgets, and even phone apps!

"The Basics" About Fertility

Whether you are trying to get pregnant or trying NOT to get pregnant, there is basic information about female fertility that you must know and understand. The Fertility Awareness Method (FAM) is a set of practices that are used to help us determine the most fertile and infertile times during a woman's menstrual cycle. These practices include monitoring Basal Body Temperature (BBT), Cervical Mucus (CM), and cervical position.

Basal body temperature

In most women, ovulation will cause the body's temperature to rise at least 0.4 to 1.0 degrees Fahrenheit (or at least 0.2 degrees Celsius). There are special thermometers you can buy from the drug store that measure BBT, and these special thermometers are more sensitive and accurate than regular thermometers. Your temperature reading will be most accurate if taken before you even get out of bed in the morning. Keep your Basal Body thermometer next to your bed, along with a notebook or other charting system. Try to take it at the same time each morning. At the end of one or two monthly cycles, you will now have a good idea of when ovulation occurred, based on your BBT. In combination with changes noted in cervical mucus, one can develop a fairly accurate plan for pregnancy (approximately 60% within 3 months; 81% within 6 months; and 91% within 12 months).

Cervical Mucus and position

Cervical mucus (CM) is produced by the cervix, and it changes in appearance and sensation throughout a woman's monthly cycle. Fertile CM decreases the acidity in the vagina, which helps promote sperm life and mobility, helping it move through the cervix and into the uterus, toward the egg. By paying close attention to one's CM, they can track when the body is most likely preparing for ovulation, as well as, when ovulation has passed. As a woman gets closer to ovulation, her CM will become thinner and stickier. When ovulation is about to occur, her CM will be clear, slippery, and very stretchy.

In addition to the CM, the position of the cervix will change throughout a woman's cycle. During the infertile phase of a woman's cycle, the cervix will be low in the vaginal canal and will feel firm to the touch. During the more fertile period of her cycle, the cervix will rise higher in the vaginal canal and it will feel softer to the touch. Keeping track of both your BBT and CM will increase your ability to plan the best times to try to conceive. Visit www.babycenter.com for a free chart you can print out to track your BBT and CM.

Note: It is generally advised that you do not douche with anything other than warm water when trying to get pregnant, as it can not only affect the quality and quantity of your CM, it can also change the pH balance inside the vagina, creating an environment that can adversely affect the sperm.

Natural Ways to Boost Your Odds

There are a number of things you can do to help increase your fertility and increase your odds of conceiving. Diet and exercise both have a big influence on a woman's fertility. In addition to making sure you are taking a prenatal vitamin, you want to make sure that you are eating enough protein, iron, and zinc. You also want to make sure that you and your partner are getting enough Vitamin C. Fertility is decreased in both men and women who are deficient in Vitamin C. Moreover, sperm counts increased by almost 60% in research studies where men took 1000mg of Vitamin C, daily, for two months. Women should make sure that they are getting adequate amounts of Vitamin C, but avoid "mega-doses" of it, as it can cause the CM to be drier, thus making it more difficult for sperm to reach the egg. Most prenatal vitamins already have a sufficient amount for women.

Being underweight or overweight can cause difficulty with getting pregnant. Research shows that women who are underweight (a BMI lower than 19) take four times as long to get pregnant as someone with a BMI in the "normal" range (19-24.9). According to reports in the journal *Human Reproduction*, researchers documented a 4% decrease in conception odds for every point in BMI above 30. For women whose BMI was higher than 35, there was up to a 43% overall decrease in the ability to conceive. Women with a high BMI also have an increased risk of having gestational diabetes throughout their pregnancy.

Herbal Remedies

If you have been trying to get pregnant, and have already ruled out any medically-related problems from you and your partners doctors, you may want to try some of the following "fertility boosting" herbs.

- *Chaste berry*- this increases fertility by stimulating the pituitary gland. It is known to help balance sex hormones in women, including: estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone. **Stop** taking it if you become pregnant.
- *Dong Quai*- this Chinese fertility herb helps with regulating menstruation and helps balance estrogen levels in the body. **Stop** taking it if you become pregnant.
- *Red Raspberry Leaf*- this herb is known to strengthen the uterine lining, enhancing the possibility of implantation of a fertilized egg (ovum). **Stop** taking it if you become pregnant.
- *Evening Primrose Oil*- this has been used to help balance female hormones, as well as, aid in the fertile quality of cervical mucus.

*For more herbal remedies, take a look at the book "The Infertility Cure" mentioned in the [Resources](#) section at the end of this article.

Things to Avoid

Most people are aware of the negative effects that smoking cigarettes and/or taking drugs (legal or illegal) can have on male and female fertility. However, there are many less obvious things to avoid when you want to increase your chances to conceive. At the top of my list are: stress, excessive alcohol, excessive caffeine, decongestants, and lubricants during sexual activity that are not “fertility-friendly.”

STRESS

Stress can have a negative impact on fertility in both men and women. In women, being overly stressed-out can cause irregular menstruation, and in severe cases, can even stop menstruation. In men, stress can cause problems with sexual functioning, as well as, interference in the hormone production needed to produce healthy sperm.

Excessive alcohol or caffeine

Drinking too much alcohol can affect a woman’s estrogen and progesterone levels—hormones that are vital for fertility. Excessive alcohol intake has also been proven to cause problems with both ovulation and menstruation. In men, heavy drinking can affect the quality and quantity of sperm that they produce. When it comes to caffeine, the research isn’t as solid. Some supports green tea (which has small doses of caffeine) due to its antioxidants, and in fact has been shown to help with CM and thus odds of conceiving. Coffee, on the other hand, does not have the same antioxidant effects, and it has higher amounts of caffeine, thus putting it in the “avoid” category for some researchers. Both sides seem to agree that there can be “too much” caffeine—which is more than 300mg per day; and levels above that can be detrimental to a woman’s fertility.

Decongestants

This one is surprising to a lot of my patients. Over the counter medications containing decongestants (e.g., pseudoephedrine, guaifenesin, etc.) can affect the quality of CM, making it more dry. Some suggest that it can make it dry enough to actually block sperm from being able to pass through the os (i.e. cervical opening) to reach the egg. If you absolutely have to take a medication that has a decongestant during your time of ovulation, be sure to drink a lot of fluids to try to help counter the effects. In addition, you may also want to use a fertility-friendly lubricant to help supplement your own CM. While there is no absolute, “cure-all” solution, trying some of these things can help.

Store-bought Lubrication

Many couples who are trying to get pregnant may come to depend on the aid of a lubricant. This may be because they are trying to squeeze in a “quickie” during a fertile window of opportunity, or because they are trying for several days in a row, and a lubricant can help reduce soreness. Whatever the reason, if you are using your favorite lube while trying to get pregnant, you should keep in mind that not all lubricants are fertility-friendly. The chemicals in regular store bought lubricants (e.g. KY, Astroglide, etc.) can damage or even kill sperm. Some studies have shown a decrease in sperm motility after contact with these lubricants. There are now several fertility-friendly options, including: **Pre-Seed**, a fertility-friendly lubricant, safe for women who are trying to get pregnant. It can generally be found in your local drugstore. **Yes Baby**, a fertility-friendly lubricant that is developed and sold out of the U.K. It is Certified Organic, by the U.K.’s Soil Association. **Conceive Plus**, claims to be more than just a fertility-friendly option. According to the makers, it contains calcium and magnesium ions, which “are essential to prolonging sperm viability (keeping sperm healthy) and motility (helping sperm to swim)” (www.conceiveplus.com).

Widgets, and Gadgets, and Apps...oh, my!

There are a number of additional tools, “gadgets,” and even phone apps out there to help couples trying to conceive. Here are a few of my favorite:

- **Basal Body Thermometer:** Optimus Petit Sophia Fertility Monitor. It costs approximately \$90, but for the money, you get one heck of a helper! It will store your daily temperature for 210 days (six menstrual cycles); it indicates fertile days, possibility of pregnancy, and hypothetical due dates. It even has a PC printout function and an alarm clock—to make sure you take your temperature at the same time every day!
- **OV Watch:** It costs between \$130-170. It detects ovulation and fertility just by touching your skin! By monitoring your skins secretions of chloride ions it notifies you for four days, before ovulation. (It’s not as pretty as a Movado...but ya can’t have it all...yet!)
- **Instead Softcups:** Originally marketed for use during menstruation, women trying to get pregnant have found a new use for them. These Softcups can be inserted after intercourse to help keep the sperm close to the cervix, and maximize the chances of one making it to the egg.
- **Phone Apps: My Days**, by Christian A. Mueller. It tracks the users period, ovulation, and fertile days. **Fertility Friend** app for the iphone, by fertilityfriend.com. This app tracks your period, fertile days, ovulation prediction. It allows users to enter their daily temperature, CM, and other customizable data to give you the most accurate data. Similar apps: **Ovu View Period Tracker** (free), **Woman Log Calendar** (for Android), and **Woman Calendar** (for iPhone). The prices range from free to approximately \$10.

If you are interested in more traditional resources, see below.

Additional Resources:

Kits: Ovulation Prediction Kit (various makers, sold at most drugstores); and The Conception Kit, by ConceiveX.

DVD: Restoring Fertility: Yoga for Optimal Fertility, by Brandon Horn & Wendy Yu.

Books:

Taking Charge of Your Fertility, by Toni Weschler.

The Infertility Cure: The Ancient Chinese Wellness Program for Getting Pregnant & Having Healthy Babies, by Randine Lewis.

The Fastest Way to Get Pregnant Naturally, by Christopher Williams.

Making Babies: A Proven 3-Month Program for Maximum Fertility, by Sami David.

The Fertility Diet, by Jorge Chavarro.

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