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Preparing for Pregnancy

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Key facts

- Take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily from before you try to conceive until 12 weeks of pregnancy.
- Take 10 micrograms of vitamin D daily, and avoid supplements containing vitamin A.
- Not drinking alcohol is the safest approach when trying to conceive and in pregnancy.
- Sperm take around three months to develop, so men's lifestyle changes need time to take effect.
- Most couples under 35 conceive within a year, and help is available if you do not.

Why prepare for pregnancy?

The months before conception matter. The egg released at ovulation matures over about three months, and sperm take around 70 to 90 days to develop. Healthy habits in both partners during this time support fertility and give a pregnancy the best start.

Preparing yourself for pregnancy

- **Folic acid:** take 400 micrograms daily before conceiving and until 12 weeks of pregnancy. A higher 5mg dose is advised for some women, for example those with diabetes, a BMI of 30 or more, epilepsy medication or a previous pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect. Ask your GP.
- **Vitamin D:** take 10 micrograms daily. Avoid supplements containing vitamin A (retinol) and fish liver oils.
- **Healthy weight:** being very underweight or overweight can affect ovulation.
- **Alcohol:** the safest approach is not to drink when trying to conceive.
- **Caffeine:** keep to under 200mg a day, about two mugs of instant coffee.
- **Smoking and recreational drugs:** stopping improves fertility and pregnancy outcomes for both partners.
- **Medicines:** check with your GP or pharmacist that any regular medicines are safe in pregnancy.
- **Health checks:** make sure your cervical screening is up to date, check you are immune to rubella (German measles) and consider a sexual health screen.

Understanding your cycle

A typical cycle lasts 25 to 35 days. Ovulation happens about 12 to 16 days before the next period. An egg survives for 12 to 24 hours, but sperm can survive for up to five to seven days, so the fertile window includes the days before ovulation. Having sex every other day in the fertile window (days 10 to 17 of a 28-day cycle) is the optimal way to conceive without the pressure of exact timing. Basal body temperature charting and cervical mucus observation can help you understand your own pattern.

If your periods are irregular or absent, or you have not had a period for several months, it is worth seeking advice before trying to conceive.

Make a pre-conception action plan

Many women think that to conceive they need only stop using their contraceptive method. But some forms of contraception reduce the chances of healthy conception, and some couples are, for no obvious reason, still waiting long after they expected to conceive. Every couple will benefit from being more active and making positive preparations several months before conception is planned.

- Set a pre-conception window: 18 months if you use the contraceptive injection (Depo-Provera) or have a hormonal implant, 12 months if you use the contraceptive pill, 6 months if you have a coil (IUD).
- Take extra zinc (15mg daily), vitamin C (250mg daily) and vitamin B6 (100mg daily) to replace deficiencies the pill, injection or implant commonly cause.
- Have your coil or implant removed as soon as possible before ovulation in a natural cycle.
- Use a cap, diaphragm or condoms for the rest of the pre-conception window.
- Keep a calendar of your cycle, and chart your basal body temperature if possible.
- Include cauliflower, seeds and nuts, roe and eggs in your diet, as these are rich in the nutrients you need.
- Arrange a rubella immunity check, cervical screening if not up to date and a sexual health screen.
- Start taking 400 micrograms of folic acid daily.
- If you smoke, stop.
- Limit alcohol to 2 units a day and caffeine to 3 cups a day.
- Ask your partner to have a semen analysis.
- Stop barrier contraception at the end of your pre-conception window but keep everything else going.
- Relax and enjoy life; sometimes a holiday sets the right tone.
- Make sure you are having regular unprotected sex.
- Achieving orgasm increases the possibility of conception; orgasm at any time up to 40 minutes after male ejaculation gives the best chance of conceiving.

Preparing your partner for pregnancy

Male factors contribute to around half of fertility problems, so it makes sense for both partners to prepare. Sperm health is helped by:

- Not smoking and limiting alcohol
- A healthy weight and a balanced diet rich in fruit, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats
- Avoiding anabolic steroids and recreational drugs
- Keeping the testicles cool: avoiding hot tubs, saunas and laptops on the lap
- Reducing exposure to workplace chemicals such as solvents, pesticides and lead

A semen analysis is a simple test of sperm count, movement and shape. If results are low, lifestyle changes and, where appropriate, nutritional supplements can be tried, with a repeat test after about three months, since that is how long new sperm take to develop.

How do we help couples prepare for pregnancy?

- **Preconception consultation** for one or both partners, reviewing health, cycle and lifestyle.

- **Cycle and ovulation assessment** using blood tests, basal body temperature charts and ultrasound.
- **Natural fertility awareness teaching** with our certified instructor, to help you identify your fertile window.
- **Chinese herbal medicine and fertility vitamin supplements** tailored to each partner, alongside conventional care where needed.

Frequently asked questions

How long does it take to get pregnant?

About 8 in 10 couples under 40 conceive within a year of regular unprotected sex, and most of the rest within two years. Seek advice after a year if you are under 35, or six months if you are 35 or over.

When should I start taking folic acid?

Ideally at least a month before you start trying, and continue until 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Should my partner take supplements?

A healthy diet comes first. Some men with poor semen results may benefit from targeted supplements, which we can discuss after a semen analysis.

Book a consultation

To book, visit womensnaturalhealthclinic.com/book or call 020 3811 8778. Initial consultations last up to one hour at our clinic at 16 Bridle Lane, St Margaret’s, Twickenham TW1 3EE.

Sources

- NHS: Trying for a baby (nhs.uk/pregnancy/trying-for-a-baby)
- NHS: Vitamins, supplements and nutrition in pregnancy (nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/vitamins-supplements-and-nutrition)