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Understanding Your Most Fertile Time

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Overview

One of the hallmarks of the current generation is that women are choosing to have children later in life, and this trend is likely to continue. In England and Wales the average age of mothers is now 31, and the average age of first-time mothers is 29.4, the highest on record (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Because fertility declines with age, having children later means that many couples will experience difficulty conceiving. Advances in fertility treatment have improved women's chances of conception as they age, and more couples than ever are taking advantage of them.

Identifying your fertile window

Many couples do not know all they need to about the first and most important step in conceiving: ovulation. Ovulation is the release of an egg (usually one, sometimes more) from a woman's ovary. Conception occurs when a sperm fertilises that egg.

While sperm can survive for several days inside a woman's reproductive tract (depending on sperm quality and quantity), an egg can only survive for 12 to 24 hours after ovulation. This limits the time when conception is most likely. According to a survey presented at the World Congress on Fertility and Sterility, 20 percent of problems conceiving are due to couples not timing intercourse correctly during the woman's fertile time.

The Opinion Research Corporation International (ORC) found that most women do not know when they can become pregnant. Nearly all women of reproductive age (98 percent) were unclear how many days each month it is possible to become pregnant, and more than half (52 percent) were not sure when those fertile days occur in their cycle.

To increase the chance of pregnancy, women should monitor their fertile time: the period during which sperm can survive in the reproductive tract until ovulation and fertilisation can occur. A woman's most fertile period is typically several days (usually no more than 5 to 6), ending on the day after ovulation. Because menstrual cycles vary from one woman to another, and even from one cycle to the next in the same woman, identifying the fertile time can be challenging.

Methods

There are several methods a woman can use to find out when she is most likely to conceive:

- **Basal body temperature (BBT):** your temperature first thing in the morning, before getting up or doing anything. In a normal cycle, BBT rises by about 0.2 to 0.5°C from just after ovulation until the start of the next cycle.
- **Cervical mucus:** most of the time the cervix produces mucus that protects the body from sperm, bacteria and other organisms. For several days each month the mucus changes to allow sperm through to the fallopian tubes. By monitoring these changes, a woman can identify her fertile time.
- **Symptothermal:** charting a combination of fertility signs, such as cervical secretions and BBT, can help identify a woman's fertile time.

These charting methods record the secondary signs of fertility caused by hormone changes. Because they can be affected by factors such as infections or medicines, they need careful monitoring and analysis and are never 100% reliable. An alternative is to measure hormone levels directly. A rise in oestrogen marks the start of most women's fertile phase, while a rise

in luteinising hormone (LH) signals that ovulation will occur soon, usually within about 24 to 36 hours.

Pregnancy probability

The chance of becoming pregnant naturally in any one cycle falls from about 20 percent for women over 30 to about 5 percent for women over 40. Among healthy women trying to conceive, nearly all pregnancies result from intercourse during the six days leading up to and including the day of ovulation. Identifying your most fertile days and timing intercourse accordingly can increase your chances of pregnancy and reduce unnecessary anxiety.

Other factors may prevent pregnancy even when a woman is ovulating, including:

- previous tubal surgery
- a history of pelvic inflammation or infection
- scar tissue from previous surgery
- irregular or infrequent cycles
- male partner infertility

A woman under 35 who is trying to become pregnant should use timing methods for no longer than one year before seeing a doctor to investigate. A woman over 35 should use timing methods for up to six months before seeking medical advice.

Find out more on our Age and Fertility and Natural Family Planning pages at womensnaturalhealthclinic.com.

Our female healthcare philosophy

At the Women's Natural Health Clinic, we specialise in comprehensive natural reproductive, gynaecological, obstetric and general healthcare for women from adolescence to post-menopause. We integrate oriental and western medical diagnosis to create a naturally oriented treatment plan combining herbal medicine, naturopathic medicine, acupuncture, nutritional therapy, exercise and lifestyle, tailored to each woman.

To book an appointment, visit womensnaturalhealthclinic.com/book or call 020 3811 8778.