

# Fertility & pregnancy

## What does fertility and infertility mean?

Fertility is your ability to create a pregnancy. It requires healthy sperm from a male to successfully make its way to a woman's healthy egg, penetrate the egg and for that egg to successfully implant in the lining of the uterus. A problem at any of these steps can affect your fertility.

Infertility is defined as 12 months of regular unprotected intercourse without conception.

## What affects fertility?

- **Fertility declines with age** – especially the age of the woman's eggs, but also the man's sperm. Women are born with all the eggs they will ever have and these are either released at ovulation or reduce in quality and quantity over time
- Being significantly overweight or underweight can reduce fertility by causing hormonal changes and ovulation problems
- There is strong evidence linking both active and passive smoking to fertility problems
- Research suggests heavy drinking affects fertility, including the time it takes to get pregnant and the chances of having a healthy baby
- Some prescription, over-the-counter or complementary medications may affect fertility. If you are planning to get pregnant, talk to your doctor to make sure the medications you are taking are safe
- Sexually transmissible infections (STIs), particularly chlamydia and gonorrhoea, can affect the fertility of women and men

- It's not clear if drinking caffeine, such as coffee and cola, affects your chance of pregnancy, but experts advise limiting your intake if you're trying to conceive.
- Industrial chemicals and heavy metals (eg, lead, mercury) can affect a woman's fertility. Repeated exposure to them may reduce fertility and increase the risk of miscarriage and birth defects.

## Trying for pregnancy

When you start trying for a baby, there are many things that can help you. This includes looking after your general health, managing stress and generally caring for yourself. Understanding ovulation, and when the best time is to try for conception, is critical.



## What is the best time for conception?

There are certain days in a woman's menstrual cycle when pregnancy is more likely. This is during the five days before ovulation and the day of ovulation. These days are the 'fertile window' of opportunity to conceive. The likelihood of becoming pregnant is dramatically increased if you have intercourse in the three days leading up to, and including, ovulation.

## Signs of ovulation

You may like to use an ovulation calculator or predictor kit, but the following information might also help:

<b>Mucus changes</b>	A woman's vaginal mucus becomes thick and slippery, like egg white
<b>Abdominal pain</b>	Some women experience pain – either general, or on one side of the abdomen (tummy)
<b>Premenstrual-like symptoms</b>	There may be breast tenderness, abdominal bloating and/or moodiness

## How do you prepare for pregnancy?

See your doctor for pre-pregnancy planning. This may include:

- a reproductive health check, including a detailed history and examination looking for genetic or medical conditions, medication and substance use (such as alcohol and tobacco), and an immunisation review (eg whooping cough and rubella)
- a review of your diet and any existing health conditions (eg, diabetes, thyroid problems) and what supplements you may need, such as folic acid
- getting your body ready by ensuring you're eating a healthy diet, not smoking, and taking folic acid supplements.

## Having trouble conceiving?

A woman's fertility starts to decline after about 28 years of age, drops significantly after 35 years and drops dramatically after 40 years. Assisted reproductive methods, such as IVF, can help, but each woman's situation is different. If you don't conceive when you plan to, it can be frustrating and an emotional rollercoaster ride.

- Infertility is more common than most people think. Up to 15% of couples who try for a baby will experience fertility problems
- It can be devastating when months go by without a much-wanted pregnancy happening and it's well known that infertility can cause emotional distress and may lead to relationship problems
- Trouble conceiving can be caused by problems with ovulation, blocked fallopian tubes, endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), premature menopause, fibroids, thyroid problems and sperm problems
- There are a number of investigations your doctor can perform to determine the cause of your infertility, such as blood tests to check for hormone changes. There are also many treatment options available; you and your doctor can discuss which treatment will be best for you
- Sometimes infertility can't be explained and there is no clear reason why you are unable to conceive a child. If you have tried without success for 12 months or more – or six months if you're a woman older than 35 – talk to your doctor about your options.

For more information go to [jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/fertility-pregnancy](http://jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/fertility-pregnancy)

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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Jean Hailes for Women's Health takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. This fact sheet generally uses the terms 'women' and 'girls'. These terms are intended to include women with diverse sexualities, intersex women, and women with a transgender experience.

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