

Fertility factors for life!

The Health Column

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Did you know that one in six Australian couples suffer infertility?

Infertility is the inability of a couple to conceive after a year of unprotected intercourse, or the inability to carry pregnancies to a live birth. Many couples suffering infertility problems can be successfully treated with medical or surgical techniques, or lifestyle changes. For a fertile couple in their twenties having regular unprotected sex, the chance of conceiving each month is only 25 per cent. Infertility is shared equally among men and women. Causes of infertility are many and varied and involve male, female or a combination of factors. These include problems with:



- the production of sperm or eggs
- the structure or function of male or female reproductive systems
- hormonal and immune conditions.

There are degrees of infertility. The majority of infertile couples are actually **sub fertile** – they produce eggs and sperm but have difficulty conceiving due to disorders such as hormone imbalances and problems of the reproductive tract. Cases of total infertility – where no eggs or sperm are produced – are rare.

Key factors which can affect fertility include age, weight, smoking, caffeine, alcohol use, and timing.

The Fertility Coalition (yourfertility.org.au) produces a range of information dealing with caffeine, alcohol, and smoking. The Coalition points outline that there is an increasing body of evidence that these lifestyle factors can adversely affect fertility. These factors can be modified, so making a few healthy lifestyle changes can make it easier to conceive.

The number one factor affecting a couple's chances of conceiving is the woman's age, as the number of healthy eggs your ovary contains will dramatically decline as you age – especially once you are over 35.

Both active and passive smoking reduce male and female fertility, and are harmful for the growing baby. It has also been found that male and female smoking significantly reduces the chance of conception and live birth rates, and increases the risk of miscarriage. It is recommended that men and women, who smoke and wish to conceive, stop smoking. For couples where one or both partners smoke, factual information about the risks of smoking and active support to stop smoking can be obtained from your local pharmacy. This includes treatment with nicotine replacement therapy (NRT).

Based on existing evidence, recommendations also suggest women try to limit their caffeine intake to the equivalent of 1–2 cups of coffee per day. In general, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends no more than two standard drinks per day for women and four for men, with at least two alcohol-free days per week. The impact of alcohol on a woman's reproductive system is unknown, however heavy intake in men is known to affect sperm production. Reduce your alcohol intake during the second half of your menstrual cycle, where pregnancy could be a possibility. The weeks following a positive pregnancy test are an important stage of development for the baby, and abstinence from alcohol is recommended.

The Fertility Coalition also has information on the impact of exercise on fertility. The Coalition reports that there is some evidence that moderate exercise benefits fertility, while high-intensity and high-frequency exercise may adversely affect fertility. For men and women who are overweight or obese, achieving and maintaining a modest weight loss may improve fertility and will improve other obesity-related health problems.

All couples trying to conceive should consider *Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for Adults (18-64 years)*. These guidelines suggest consulting your doctor for advice on the best types of physical activity for you. Activity can be accumulated by being active on most, but preferably, all days every week.

Finally, keeping a daily record of your menstrual cycle can help you recognise when you are more fertile in order to plan a pregnancy.

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. Pharmacists and pharmacy staff can advise on key fertility factors including age, weight, smoking, alcohol use, and timing. Many pharmacies also offer professional services to assist you with these fertility factors. Your local pharmacy can also provide you with products used to monitor your menstrual cycle in order to help you recognise the 'fertile window' – the best time to try and conceive. This is different for every woman.

In addition, you can get more information on key fertility factors from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. Self Care Fact Cards available from these pharmacies include topics such as *Pregnancy and ovulation* and *Menstrual Chart*, as well as lifestyle topics such as *Alcohol*, *Staying a non-smoker*, and *Weight and health*.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772.