

Anxiety, anger and frustration

The weeks and months when you are trying for a baby, whether naturally or through treatment such as IVF, can be some of the most stressful and demanding of your life. There is so much information to take in and so many things to consider if it doesn't work out for you straightaway, and it is easy to feel helpless, useless, frustrated, angry and alone.

It is normal to feel any or all of these emotions, and there is no 'right way' to cope with things. There are a number of methods that you may want to consider to help you cope with the situation:

- **Share and socialise.** Don't bottle up questions, worries and frustrations. If you cannot discuss things at length with your partner, then speak to close friends, your GP or a consultant at Herts & Essex Fertility Centre
- **Write it down.** Keeping a fertility journal can be a really effective way to catalogue your experiences, progress and problems. A journal is a great device for getting your concerns out of your head and on to paper. Tell your partner that you are keeping a record, but only offer to share the contents if you feel comfortable doing so
- **Have fun.** It might seem easier said than done at times, but try to remember that having a baby isn't the sole purpose of your relationship together. Do the things that you have always enjoyed together, and remember that it's ok to enjoy sex without the pressure of having to 'make it count'



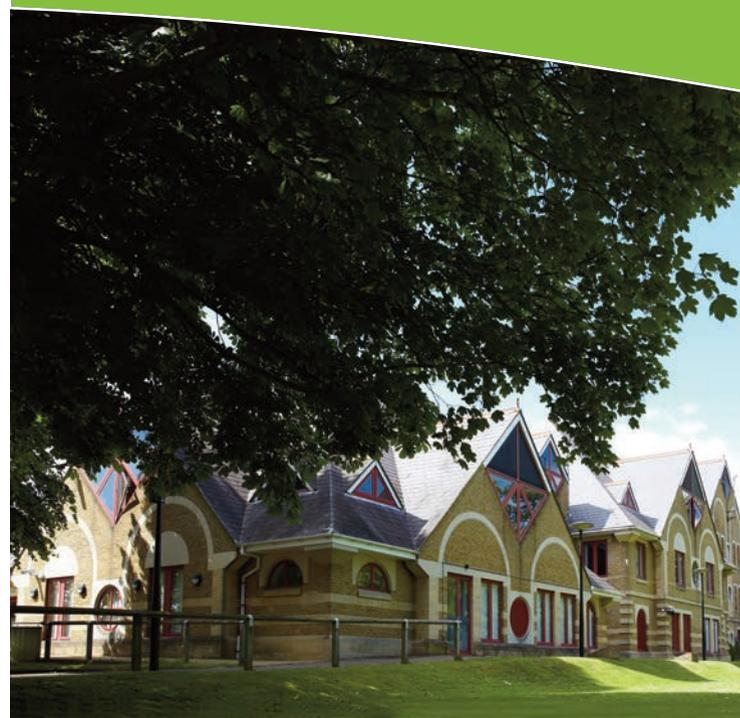
Medical conditions

Incorporating as much of this advice as possible into your everyday life should go a long way to making you 'fit for fertility', but there are a number of medical conditions that may still affect your ability to conceive.

If you make some of the positive changes suggested in this guide but are still having problems conceiving, it may be because of one of the following reasons:

- **Endometriosis** – This is a condition which may cause scar tissue, which in turn may damage or block your fallopian tubes
- **Uterine Fibroids** – These are common non-cancerous tumours of the womb. If located within or too close to the lining of the womb (endometrium) they can significantly impede the implantation of embryos, and will require excision
- **Endometrial Polyps** – These are fleshy growths from the womb lining protruding into the cavity of the womb. They will also impede implantation and require removal. 3D Saline Infusion Sonography (SIS) is an effective test to check fibroids and polyps inside the womb cavity
- **Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID)** – An infection normally caused by Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD), leading to tubal damage and blockage
- **Polycystic Ovaries** – This often causes irregular periods and is the most common cause of ovulatory problems. Anti-Müllerian Hormone blood tests and ultrasound scans of the ovaries are the best tools to diagnose the condition
- **Early menopause** – 1% of women naturally experience the menopause before the age of 40. It is often hereditary but radiotherapy/chemotherapy treatment and operations on the ovaries are other causes
- **Age** – Although not a medical condition, age is the most important determinant in achieving a successful pregnancy. A woman is born with all her eggs and both the quality and number will deteriorate with age especially from 35 onwards

If you would like more information, please speak to your GP or a consultant at Herts & Essex Fertility Centre.



Herts & Essex
Fertility Centre



HERTS & ESSEX FERTILITY CENTRE

Bishops' College
Churchgate
Cheshunt
Hertfordshire EN8 9XP

T: 01992 78 50 60

E: enquiries@hertsandessexfertility.com

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www.hertsandessexfertility.com

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Female Fertility

You are probably well aware that a number of factors affect your ability to conceive naturally. Aside from any underlying medical conditions that may damage or impair your fertility, your age, diet, lifestyle and level of general health and fitness play a big part.

The vast majority of women are most fertile during their early twenties and many have a relatively good chance of conceiving up to the age of 35. After 35, fertility starts to decline, and by the age of 40 most women will have only a 2 in 5 chance of conceiving naturally.

While age is a factor beyond your control, there are several key lifestyle changes you can make in the months before and during your pregnancy to give you the very best chance of conceiving.



Diet

It is tempting to seek out miracle supplements and trendy superfoods, but there are no quick fixes.

A well-balanced diet will strengthen your immune system and keep your Body Mass Index (BMI) at a healthy level, which is key to preparing your body for a baby. A healthy BMI is somewhere between 18 and 25.

Levels outside of this range may cause problems when it comes to conceiving, and carrying your baby. A healthy, balanced diet combined with regular, low-impact exercise should help you achieve a score within this range.

A healthy fertility diet should include the following:

- At least five portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day
- Plenty of wholegrain foods, such as wholemeal bread, pasta, cereals and rice
- A good balance of lean meats, fish, eggs and pulses
- At least 8 to 10 cups of water a day

If you need to lose weight before trying for a baby or beginning your treatment, this should be done safely and over a reasonable period of time. Alongside a consistent exercise plan, the following diet tips can help you during the weeks and months before you conceive:

- Try swapping your normal breakfast for a 30g bowl of porridge. The oats will satisfy you for longer and stop the urge to snack between breakfast and lunch
- Smaller portions at mealtimes will help reduce your overall daily fat and calorie intake
- Healthy nibbles, such as fresh or dried fruit and nuts, are a good alternative to sugary treats and fatty snacks
- Foods rich in calcium, such as yoghurt, cheese and milk, are great before and during your pregnancy but all have lower fat, low calorie alternatives

Liver products (such as pâté) and soft, mouldy or strong cheeses are potentially dangerous because they are more prone to be infected with listeria bacteria. This is a well-known cause of miscarriages and should be avoided when you are trying for a baby.

While the effects of caffeine on female fertility are fairly inconclusive, it is recommended that you try to cut your intake to one or two cups of coffee a day.

Supplements and medication

While fertility supplements on their own can never surpass the benefits of a healthy, balanced diet, there are some supplements that are necessary when trying to conceive. Folic acid is a vital component of antenatal supplements and will significantly reduce the risk of your baby developing Spina Bifida, a neural tube defect that is potentially fatal. Most women will need at least 400 mcg of folic acid per day.

Medication

A number of over-the-counter medications can interfere with your body's ability to conceive. Steroids (commonly found in allergy medications), skin creams and gels containing oestrogen or progesterone, and some herbal remedies (such as St John's Wort) can seriously damage your fertility and stop you getting pregnant.

If you have any concerns or questions about any supplements or medication that you are currently taking, do speak to your GP or to a consultant at Herts & Essex Fertility Centre.

Exercise

Alongside a balanced diet, a regular exercise routine can have benefits far beyond keeping your weight and BMI at a healthy level.

Regular exercise can help you to prepare your body for the stresses and strains of carrying a child and giving birth, and will improve your body's circulation, including that of your reproductive organs.

Your strength, stamina and flexibility can be improved in the months approaching your pregnancy by taking up regular walking, running, cycling, swimming, yoga or Pilates. High-intensity interval training (HIIT) is not recommended, and if you are already a regular gym user, your workouts should be toned down during the weeks and months before you plan to conceive or begin treatment.

Swimming is a particularly good choice of aerobic exercise as it is low impact and can be continued during your pregnancy.



Lifestyle

Stress, depression and certain lifestyle choices can weaken your immune system and affect your ability to conceive. If you are undergoing fertility treatment it will inevitably be an emotionally demanding time for you and your partner. However, there are a number of steps that you can take to reduce both the physical and psychological strain.

Sleep

Sleep is a key part of any new diet, exercise or health regime. Your body repairs and refuels itself while you sleep, rebalancing the hormones that regulate your stress and energy levels. While the demands of modern life can make it hard to get your full eight hours every night, adapting your morning or evening routines to allow for an extra hour or two in bed can make a difference in preparing your body for pregnancy.

Alcohol, smoking and drugs

The damage that excessive alcohol consumption, regular smoking and drug use can cause to your general health and wellbeing is well documented, the effect that these substances can have on your fertility is sometimes overlooked.

Studies show that expectant mothers who regularly drink, smoke or use recreational drugs have a much higher chance of miscarrying and giving birth to premature or underweight babies.

The odd glass or two of wine can often take the edge off of a particularly stressful day, but if you are trying to conceive it is best to keep to one small glass of wine once or twice a week.