



Making the choice to try to have a baby can be a scary, exciting, and life-altering decision. Some people get pregnant quickly or accidentally. For others, it takes longer than imagined or it might not happen at all. There is much to learn about your fertility. Some can be done on your own while other steps require the help of a health care provider or fertility clinic.

The basics: ingredients needed for a pregnancy

- Egg (ovum)
- Sperm
- A healthy uterus
- The right cycles of hormones to sustain a pregnancy

You and a partner may have these necessities or they can come from alternative places. For example, the egg or sperm can be from donors, the uterus may be a surrogate's, and some hormones can be prescribed if needed. If you use alternative methods to achieve pregnancy, you may need the help of a health care provider or fertility clinic.

Ovulation

Ovulation is the process of an egg sac developing in the ovary and being released. It then travels down the fallopian tube where it can be fertilized by a sperm (if one is present). If fertilization happens, the fertilized egg then travels into the uterus to implant into the uterine lining. If the egg is not fertilized, or if it does not implant, it will leave the body in vaginal secretions and some time later the uterine lining would be shed in menstruation.

How to know if you are ovulating:

- Charting your menstrual cycles is one way to determine over time if you ovulate. This is done by taking your temperature every morning at the same time (before getting out of bed or having anything to eat or drink) using a sensitive thermometer called a basal body temperature thermometer. After ovulation, your body temperature rises a small amount due to the effects of the hormone progesterone. You can keep track of this on a graph yourself or there are computer programs that can do this tracking for you.
 - Pros: you can find out you are ovulating and when.
 - Cons: you find out that you have ovulated after it has already happened, which may be too late to attempt pregnancy that cycle. This means that charting is more helpful for people with regular cycles who can then predict when they might ovulate in future cycles, and less helpful for people whose cycles are irregular.

- Cervical mucus often becomes clear and stretchy (the consistency of egg whites) in the couple of days before ovulation (after ovulation it becomes sticky and there is less of it). Cervical mucus can be checked by reaching into your vagina and gently sweeping around with your (or a partner's) fingers, or sometimes it is visible when wiping after using the toilet.
 - Pros: cervical mucus is helpful for sperm to swim up to the uterus and fallopian tubes, and might be a good signal that you are likely to ovulate soon.
 - Cons: some people have cervical mucus without ovulating or at other times than ovulation, in which case it won't help in achieving pregnancy.
- Ovulation predictor kits are available at pharmacies and on-line. They work by detecting the hormone burst that precedes ovulation by about 24 hours. They contain detailed instructions and are relatively easy to use, although they can be expensive.
 - Pros: can help with timing of intercourse or insemination
 - Cons: can't tell you if you actually ovulated, just that your body produced the hormones telling you to ovulate.
- Ovulation can also be checked for by a variety of tests that a doctor can order. If you are under 35 years old, most health care providers require that you have tried to get pregnant for a year before they will refer you to specialists. If you are over 35 years old, the time is shortened to six months.

Sperm

While technically it takes just one sperm to get pregnant, the fact is that the journey to meet an egg in the fallopian tube is a long, perilous one for a tiny sperm. Greater numbers increase the likelihood that fertilization will happen. In intercourse, about 300 million to 500 million sperm come out in one ejaculation, and even with such large numbers only about 200 sperm actually reach the egg.

How to know if enough sperm are present:

Tests for sperm are usually a sperm count, to determine how many sperm are available, and motility, to determine how well they are able to swim. These can be done at a health care provider's office and are covered by Manitoba Health.

Resources:

Taking Charge of Your Fertility by Toni Weschler

Free or paid software or on-line fertility chart interpretation -- Google "fertility charting" for a number of options.

Disclaimer: WHC provides health information for your learning only. It should not be used to replace a visit with a health care provider.

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