

ALL ABOUT THE EGG...

Once a taboo subject, fertility is now a hot topic. Irrespective of where your head is at – actively trying to conceive, keen but not in a position to try, debating whether you want children at all or struggling with fertility issues, society places so much expectation on women to procreate.

More women than ever are choosing to have babies in their thirties and forties, which means more are struggling to conceive. As women, we spend most of our reproductive life trying not to get pregnant and then to find out that getting pregnant isn't as easy for you as it seems to be for others, can feel awful. But the good news is that the conversation around fertility is becoming more open. Recent advances in reproductive medicine mean there's more information and services available to women and much more honesty around the topic.

To consider this in context, a healthy couple at prime reproductive ages (below 35) have about a 25 per cent chance of conceiving each month. Only about half of all couples get pregnant within six months of trying, about 80% within a year and approximately 90% at the end of two years. This means that, even if there is nothing wrong with you, it can take up to two years to conceive. Over the age of 35, it may take even longer.

The amount of eggs a woman has at birth (the ovarian reserve) is set. Most women are born with about 2 million egg follicles. By puberty there are about 750,000 and by the age of 45, there may be only 10,000 precious eggs left. Many women I see in the clinic are worried that they have 'old' eggs, which is a devastating terminology. Although it is true that at the age of 35 those eggs are older than at 25, as long as a woman is ovulating it's possible to change the quality of those eggs, improving her chance of conceiving nat-

urally or achieving success on an IVF cycle with her own eggs.

Whether you want to future-proof your fertility or boost your chances of conceiving in the near future, remember that getting pregnant and having a healthy baby isn't just about sex! Research shows that everything you do before trying to conceive can be as important as the sex itself. What you eat, drink, do as a job, how stressed you are – it all matters. If you are undecided, not yet ready or considering delaying trying for a baby, it is possible that healthy lifestyle choices over the course of your lifetime can influence the rate of the biological aging of your ovaries so that the relevance of your chronological age is lessened. Don't leave it too late as there are no guarantees.

TOP TIPS TO FUTURE-PROOF YOUR FERTILITY

1 Eat a diet rich in essential fats

from oily fish such as mackerel, sardines, wild salmon, pilchards and herring, as well as nuts and seeds. They are good for all body cells and can be used to manufacture and balance female hormones.

2 Incorporate vitamin E rich foods – such as seeds, almonds, hazelnuts and cashews – which helps to improve the quality and integrity of the zona pellucida (egg shell) which can harden and become more difficult for the sperm to penetrate. This gets harder with age.

3 Zinc is essential for the quality of the egg as it is an important antioxidant which protects the egg DNA. Foods rich in zinc include prawns and oysters, wheat germ, oats, and corn, pumpkin, sunflower and sesame seeds, almonds, pecans and walnuts.

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Sorcha Molloy BSc (Hons), MBant runs the Glenville Nutrition Clinic Galway, founded by Dr. Marilyn Glenville PhD, ensuring the very best nutritional advice on women's health and supporting couples preparing for pregnancy either naturally or in conjunction with IVF. If you have a health concern and would like to have an initial chat to explore how Sorcha may be able to help you, call her now on: 091 726344 or visit glenvillenutrition.ie

4 Cut back on alcohol as this will affect your egg quality.

In fact, drinking any alcohol at all can reduce your fertility by half. The more you drink, the less likely you are to conceive.

5 Caffeine, particularly in the form of coffee, decreases fertility. Drinking as little as one cup of coffee a day can halve your chances of conceiving.

6 When you are trying to conceive, one of the most important things you need to do is to balance your hormones. Minimise your exposure to 'Xenoestrogens' which are essentially environmental oestrogens, coming from pesticides and the plastic industry and found in some cosmetics.

7 Avoid smoking as this has definitely been linked with infertility and can even bring on an early menopause. This is a particularly important consideration for older women who may be trying to beat the clock.

8 Manage stress by reviewing your work/life balance and learn to say no when needed. Make time for relaxation and some exercise during the week. This is important when preparing for pregnancy because stress can negatively impact on female hormones and even switch off ovulation.

9 Take a good quality multi vitamin and mineral supplement aimed at improving egg quality and hormone balance. It should contain folic acid, a good amount of zinc and B Vitamins in an absorbable form (avoid oxides, sulphates, and chlorides).

10 Don't leave it too late. Even if your menstrual cycle is regular, it is not a guarantee that you are ovulating or that the quality of your eggs is optimal.

