

Your fertility questions answered



Can I get pregnant at any time of my cycle?

Yes, although the chances of getting pregnant at the beginning or end of your cycle are very low. The problem is, if you don't want to be pregnant, you can't take chances.

While it will vary from woman to woman, you are usually most fertile around 2 weeks before your next period is due. This is when an egg is released from your ovaries (ovulation). Sperm can live for up to 5 days inside you, so even if you have sex early on in your cycle there is a possibility sperm will still be there when you ovulate, and the egg will be fertilised. If you ovulate early, it is possible to get pregnant shortly after your period finishes.

Some women think if they've had unprotected sex a few times and not become pregnant that they may be infertile, but all this suggests is they probably weren't having sex at their fertile time. If you've had unprotected sex and don't want to be pregnant, use emergency contraception as soon as possible after it's happened.

I've had chlamydia, will that make it more difficult for me to conceive?

Most women who have had chlamydia won't have any difficulties conceiving that are related to the infection. There may be a greater chance of chlamydia affecting fertility if you have repeated infections or if it goes untreated and causes a condition called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). However many women who have had a diagnosis of PID will go on to have babies. It's always best to identify chlamydia infection early, and testing and treatment is straightforward and painless. If you are under 25, the NHS recommends you are tested every year or when you change partners. You can also request a free postal self-test kit online in your local area. Find out more online at www.chlamydia-screening.nhs.uk

Does it become harder to conceive the older I get?

Yes it does, although not as hard as you may think. Despite the scare stories, getting pregnant is not a problem for most women in their 30s.

The best available evidence shows that among couples having regular unprotected sex:

92% aged 19-26
conceive after 1 year

86% aged 27-34
conceive after 1 year

82% aged 35-39
conceive after 1 year

More than 90% in all groups will have conceived after 2 years.

While fertility does decline with age, plenty of women get pregnant over the age of 40, with around 1 in 25 births and abortions to women in this older age group. However the risk of miscarriage increases with age, and around half of pregnancies among women in their 40s end in miscarriage. Older women also have a higher chance of having a baby affected by Down's Syndrome – although the overall risk at 40 is still only 1 in 100, meaning most pregnancies are not affected.

If you want to avoid unplanned pregnancy, contraception needs to be used until you've gone through the menopause, or are 55 or older. If you experience difficulties conceiving a wanted pregnancy at any age, you should seek medical advice.

I am fairly overweight, will that stop me getting pregnant?

Being very overweight (with a BMI of 30 or above) may mean it takes a bit longer to conceive a wanted pregnancy, but few obese women are infertile. If you want to become pregnant, it's recommended that you try to lose some weight before conceiving, as some of the risks associated with pregnancy increase with a greater BMI. This should be kept in perspective – the overall risk of early miscarriage is one in 5, and if you have a BMI of over 30 the risk is one in 4. If you don't want to become pregnant, it's important to find a contraceptive method that suits you. You should not be denied most contraceptive methods on the basis of your BMI alone.



Does abortion lead to infertility?

No, although it is something that those opposed to abortion may say. There is absolutely no evidence that safe, legal abortion will lead to infertility. In fact, after an abortion, fertility returns almost immediately.

I've just stopped using hormonal contraception.

Will it take a while for my fertility to return?

There is a myth that it takes some time for the hormones to leave your body before your fertility kicks in again. The truth is you can get pregnant very soon after you stop using most hormonal contraception (which is why women can conceive when they miss pills or have had a tummy bug), so you need to use another method of contraception if you want to avoid pregnancy. The same is also true of a copper IUD (the coil) - once removed, your fertility quickly returns to normal.

With the Depo-Provera injection, it can take up to a year for fertility to return once you stop the injection, but there is no guarantee. So again, if you want to avoid pregnancy, you need to use contraception straight away.

I'm worried that the emergency contraceptive pill may have harmed my fertility.

How likely is this?

There is no evidence to show that taking the emergency contraceptive pill, even repeatedly, will affect your future fertility. The most widely used emergency contraceptive pill is Levonelle®. It's very safe and contains less than half the active hormone contained in a monthly cycle of normal contraceptive pills. It can be used more than once in one cycle if needed. The hormone leaves your body within days, so you need to use another form of contraception to protect against pregnancy if you have sex again during that cycle.

The other emergency contraceptive pill is EllaOne®, which appears to be more effective than Levonelle® in women who weigh around 12 stone (75kg) or more, and provides very high protection against unwanted pregnancy for up to 5 days after unprotected sex. It should not be used more than once per cycle, and if you've taken it because you missed your regular contraceptive pill you need to use condoms as well as your usual pills for the next 14 days.

I've recently had a baby. Do I need to use contraception?

If it's been 3 weeks or more since the birth of your baby you need to use contraception if you don't want to get pregnant again straightaway. Exclusively breastfeeding can be an extremely effective method of contraception but you need to be feeding very regularly (at least every 4 hours during the day and every 6 hours at night), your baby must be less than 6 months old, and your periods must not have returned. Soothers and expressing milk also make it less effective. There are many contraceptive methods to use while breastfeeding that won't harm your baby or milk supply. Talk to your doctor or midwife to help you find one that's right for you.

Do I need to use contraception if I have polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)?

Yes. PCOS does not necessarily mean you will be unable to get pregnant, and women who have been diagnosed can still conceive naturally, even if they are not having normal periods. So if you wish to avoid pregnancy, you should still use contraception.

I have received a diagnosis of endometriosis, will I still be able to conceive?

Endometriosis is a common gynaecological condition and it does not always cause infertility. In fact, the vast majority of women with mild endometriosis will have no problem conceiving naturally. While severe endometriosis may make it more difficult to conceive, it is estimated that half of all women with the condition will have no difficulties at all.

I never conceived with my last partner. If I have a new partner and we've both been tested for STIs, can we have sex without contraception?

Not if you don't want to be pregnant. Women often assume fertility problems are down to them, but in fact a third of all cases where couples are having difficulty conceiving are due to the male partner. These can include having a low sperm count or unusually shaped sperm, which makes it harder for them to swim and fertilise an egg. You could get pregnant very quickly with a new partner even if you didn't with your last.

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