

# Back to basics

If your knowledge of conception is rusty or you have never really mastered 'women's stuff', it's worth getting to grips with it. A bit of knowledge can make quite a difference.

## The process

When men ejaculate or 'come' into a woman's vagina, millions of sperm contained in the semen begin to travel up to the vagina. Some go into a woman's womb and then onto the fallopian tubes. Very few make it but once there, one sperm needs to meet up with an egg for conception to take place. Once conception takes place the fertilised egg travels down the fallopian tubes and attaches itself to the side of the womb where a special lining has been prepared. Here it grows and develops for the next nine months.

## Women are not fertile all the time

A woman is not fertile all the time. Her body releases an egg each month from one of her ovaries. If the egg is not fertilised, it is passed out through the vagina along with the special lining that the womb prepared. This is the monthly bleed or period that a woman

has. The whole process of producing an egg is controlled by a woman's hormones. It is these hormones that can contribute towards women's mood swings.

## When is the best time?

There are certain days each month where you should aim to have sex if you are trying for a baby. This is when your partner's body is releasing an egg. This is called ovulation. If you have sex just before or during ovulation, there is a better chance of fertilisation taking place.

## How long does it take?

Conception, depends on many factors including the health of you and your partner, timing of sex and of course luck. Anything up to one year is quite normal, although for some couples it does not take long and they conceive in the first month. If nothing has happened after about a year or before if it is getting stressful, you should consider visiting your doctor together.

## How do you find out?

When women are pregnant, they usually stop having periods. There are also other signs such as feeling sick, feeling very tired and having sore breasts. A pregnancy test that can be done either in a clinic or at home will give a definite result.

## What happens next?

Once your partner knows she is pregnant, she can make an appointment to see the doctor. It is a good idea to go along too so that you can support her and learn more about what will happen in the next few months. She will be given details of the antenatal care and appointments that she should attend.

## Can anything go wrong?

Nature is not perfect and quite often pregnancies do stop. This leads to a miscarriage where a woman bleeds as the material from the pregnancy is disposed of. While miscarriages are common, emotionally they are very painful both for women and men.



Mike 34 and Emily 31 have Grace 8 months.

Mike was happy to start a family, but was surprised to find that it doesn't always happen straight away.

'I suppose I had always been brought up to believe that women's things were definitely best left to women. Emily had never been one to talk about her periods and so most of the time I can honestly say I didn't really know much about that side at all. We started trying for a baby after our summer holiday. I didn't think too much about it. I just thought you get on with it and boom, you would have a baby! I've learnt a lot since then though.

After three months, Emily was beginning to get a bit anxious and I was a bit surprised that we hadn't done it. It's funny because although I have got some good mates and they had kids, no one really talks about the getting pregnant side of things. We waited for another couple of months and then we went to see the doctor. By this time, it had got a

bit stressful for both of us. I was starting to think that maybe it was me. I wasn't sure at first if I wanted to go and tell the doctor anything, but Emily insisted.

The doctor was fine and it made me realise that many couples have to get a bit of advice. She was quite matter of fact which made it easier for me. She explained that it's normal for couples to take anything up to a year but did also ask us a few questions.

Basically, she said that I needed to cut down on the amount I was drinking and should also start to wear baggy underwear. She explained that I should try to stand up more often rather than staying seated and should have cooler showers. She also went through some of the basics as to when it is best to have sex. She did warn us that it might take a few more months before Emily would get pregnant as she thought that my sperm count might have been a bit on the low side. It seemed as if I had been doing all the wrong things and it takes a while for the sperm count to build up.

Looking back, going together to see the doctor was probably the best thing we could have done. Afterwards I found that it was much easier for Emily and I to talk things through and I learnt much more about her body. Two months later, Emily realised that she was pregnant.'

# Have you got what it takes?

## What's it like to be a father?

We ask fathers to tell us how it is.

‘If it's the first one, unless you have a very close friend or family member with children, it is a great shock. Everything in your life you have had some preparation for. You may take driving lessons before you are let out on your own, but this is different. With children, they just come and you have to get on with it.’

‘It's very rewarding, but on the other hand very exhausting. It's great to see them grow, but to hold down a job and be a good dad is harder than you think. The best bits are things like taking them out on your bike.’

‘They say that no book in the world can prepare you and they're right. It's knackered, but getting a cuddle at bed time or seeing their faces light up is amazing.’

‘Before, I would leave work and go to the pub. Now I leave work, think about what needs doing at home and then may not go to the pub. Not going to the pub is not the thing that I thought it would be. It's daft, but playing football in the garden makes up for it.’

‘I know other men who flatly wouldn't want another child because they think that it would interfere with their lives. But I love having them around and we are even thinking about having a third. It is tiring, but the love and things just outweigh the tiredness.’

‘You've got to be involved from the start. That way you get to love them and really enjoy being with them. You can't just dip in and out for the best bits because in the end you lose out. I did everything. Nappy changing, bathing – the lot. My kids love me and I love them. I often wonder what I did before they came along.’

‘Before, everyone kept telling me how awful it would be. I don't know if they were having me on. The sleepless nights, the crying and other stuff. So I was expecting it to be a lot worse than it was. We don't go out so much, but then when we do it's a bit more special.’

# Going for **OPTIMUM PERFORMANCE**

**Mention the word fertility and most people immediately think about women. Fair enough as it's women who carry the baby. But fertility is not just about women. Men have an essential role to play in the creation of a healthy baby. We look at how to help you to your optimum performance.**

## SPERM ARE SPECIAL

You may not give a second thought to sperm, assuming that they will be there when needed. In reality sperm are special for two reasons.

- 1 They carry vital genetic material without which a healthy baby cannot be produced.
- 2 They have to be physically strong enough to survive the equivalent of swimming across the English Channel. Not surprisingly, many sperm do not make this incredible journey. It is estimated that of the 300 million sperm that may set out at ejaculation, only 50–100 will make it to the right place at the right time.

## SPERM ARE LIKE TOP ATHLETES

You might imagine that every bloke produces the same quantity and quality of sperm. This is simply not true. In many ways, sperm are like top athletes and need to be provided with the best conditions in order for them to perform. Like top athletes, they too need preparation time before their big day. It takes a staggering 100 days for sperm to be ready and in this time, they need to be well looked after.

- 1 Poor diet, smoking and alcohol can lower their performance.
- 2 Stress and having sex too often can also reduce sperm count.

- 3 Sperm ideally like to be kept cooler than the rest of the body, which is why they are housed outside in the testes or balls. Wearing very tight clothing or sitting a lot can keep them at too high a temperature.

## ARE YOU GIVING YOUR SPERM THE BEST?

Sperm that have second-rate conditions simply find it harder to perform. Fewer of them are likely to survive the journey to the top of a woman's fallopian tubes.

## Simple ways to make your sperm count

### What to do

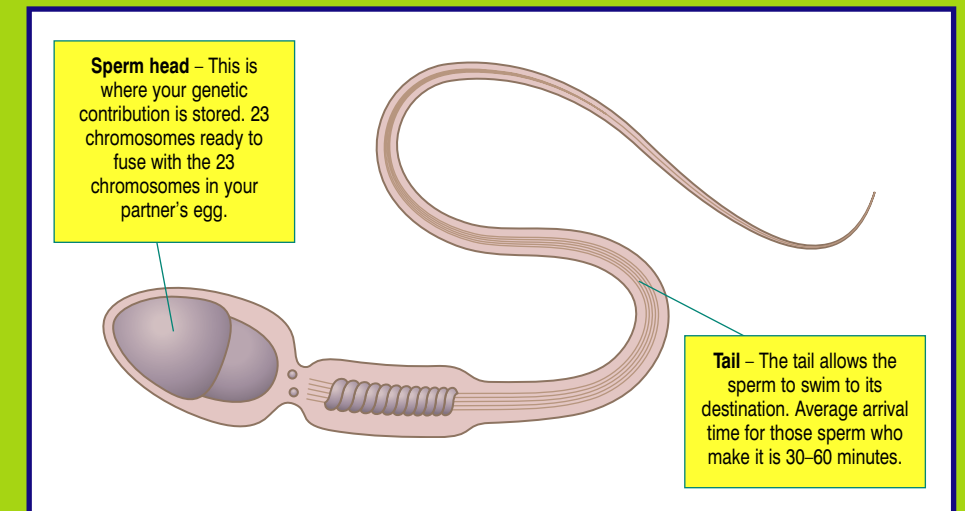
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| Cut down your alcohol intake                    | ➔ | <b>Why</b><br>Even a moderate amount of alcohol reduction can make a real difference to male fertility.  |
| Stop smoking                                    | ➔ | Smoking is a poison and does lower sperm count.  |
| Wear baggy trousers and loose underwear         | ➔ | To create the best conditions for your sperm, you should keep your balls cool.   |
| Avoid taking hot showers and sitting in baths   | ➔ | Exposure to heat increases the temperature of your balls.  |
| Do not cycle or sit down for long periods       | ➔ | Cycling and sitting down for a long time again makes the balls too hot.  |
| Eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day | ➔ | Vitamin C found in fresh fruit and vegetables makes an amazing difference to your sperm count.   |
| Take some exercise                              | ➔ | Aim to exercise for at least 20-30 minutes, three times a week. Very long periods of strenuous exercise will lower your sperm count. You may get the muscles, but you may not get the performance! |
| Avoid getting worked up                         | ➔ | Stress can have a huge effect on conception. Stay cool and get help early on if you are worried.   |

## WHAT HAPPENS IF I HAVE TO GIVE A SAMPLE?

If a couple are finding it hard to conceive, doctors routinely like to check out both partners. Normally semen samples are taken after a few days of abstinence from sex and are usually done in a clinic so that the sperm are still alive. Most men say the trickiest part is producing the actual sample. This is done in private with a few discreet magazines to stimulate the imagination and hopefully the erection.

### Sperm tests check the following:

- **Concentration** – how many sperm are being produced
- **Progressive motility** – how well sperm are able to swim and move
- **Morphology** – number of sperm and are they the correct shape and structure



## THE SPERM WHO DO NOT MAKE IT TO THE TOP

**Not all sperm will make it to the top of the fallopian tubes. If you are an 'average' man you are likely to produce between 100 and 300 million sperm in your semen when you ejaculate. Staggeringly, of these only 50–100 will make the long journey.**

### WHY SO FEW?

- 1 **Not all sperm will be properly formed. It is thought that many men will have up to 40% of sperm that will be abnormal.**
- 2 **Up to 20% will not be able to swim.**
- 3 **Some sperm will literally get lost on the way to the fallopian tubes.**
- 4 **Some sperm will not survive the journey.**

## Fact file

Sperm determine the sex of a baby.

Sperm count drops during the summer months.

Sperm counts in the male population have fallen since 1977.

# HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR SPERM?

You are likely to take it for granted, but how much do you know about sperm?

How fast can sperm swim?

- a) 3mm per hour
- b) 3cm per hour
- c) 3 metres per hour
- d) 3 km per hour

1

On average, how long do sperm survive inside a woman?

- a) 7–8 hours
- b) 1–3 days
- c) 3–5 days
- d) 8–10 days

2

Alcohol plays a factor in how many cases of male infertility?

- a) 10%
- b) 20%
- c) 30%
- d) 40%

3

How long does it take the body to produce sperm ready for ejaculation?

- a) 10 minutes
- b) 10 hours
- c) 10 days
- d) 100 days

4

To improve sperm count you should ...

- a) have sex twice a day
- b) wear loose underwear
- c) drink two pints of lager a day
- d) work out each day in the gym

5

How long does it take the fittest sperm to reach the fallopian tubes?

- a) 3–6 seconds
- b) 3–6 minutes
- c) 30–60 minutes
- d) 30–60 hours

6

Answers

1 a Sperm have to move through a woman's cervical mucus. At the time a woman is ovulating, her mucus becomes thinner and easier for the sperm to move through.  
2 c Sperm that can fertilise an egg rarely live beyond 5 days. This means that getting the timing of sex right is quite important. Ideally you should have sex around the time that a woman is ovulating.

3 d Alcohol seriously lowers sperm count even when it is quite moderate consumption. Try cutting it out or cutting down.  
4 d Sperm takes nearly three months to produce from start to finish. This means that any changes made to improve the sperm count can take a while to kick in.

5 b Wearing loose underwear keeps the testes cool. This improves sperm count. Having sex very frequently can lower sperm count as can drinking alcohol and exercising vigorously.  
6 c It takes around 30–60 minutes, although very few sperm will make it. This is why it pays to do every thing possible to ensure sperm are the fittest they can be.

## Straight talking

IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WOMEN ARE FEELING OR EVEN THINKING!

**Q** My partner wants me to stop smoking and even drinking. When I say that I don't see the point, she accuses me of not wanting a baby.

**A** Smoking and drinking can both affect the quality of your sperm and so this may be the reason why she wants you to stop. Smoking after the baby is born increases the risk of cot death and of your child developing asthma. From your partner's point of view, having a healthy baby should be a priority for both of you and so this may be why she is linking your refusal to you not wanting a baby. Consider whether or not you are ready for a baby and if you are, reassure her by at least cutting down on alcohol and getting help to stop smoking (see p.64)

**Q** My partner seems to be completely obsessed by getting pregnant. As each month goes by, she gets more and more upset. Is this normal?

**A** Yes! Once the decision has been made not all but most women want to conceive quickly. It is a life changing step and while a man knows when he has done his bit, women have to wait for at least a couple of weeks. The waiting is often the hardest part for women. Each month they have to wait not knowing whether or not they are pregnant. This means that when their period does come, they can be desperately disappointed as they must now wait for another whole month. Talk to your partner about when her next period is due so that you can be there, to commiserate or hopefully to celebrate with her. Also try to spend some time doing nice things together other than having sex.

**Q** My partner had a miscarriage a few months ago and still cries about it. I cannot seem to cheer her up.

**A** Miscarriages can be very hard to cope with emotionally even when the physical side is over. Women can also find constant daily reminders of the child they were hoping for, as they notice prams and other pregnant women. Try listening to your partner rather than trying to cheer her up if she cries. While you may want her to snap out of it, she may still need to grieve. Knowing that you are there and trying to understand her will help enormously.

**Q** My wife insists on using ovulation kits. When she thinks it is the 'right time' we are supposed to get on with it, but I don't perform to order.

**A** You are not alone. Ovulation kits can be helpful, but can also make it harder for men as the whole thing can become too clinical. Talk to your wife about how you are feeling and explore together other ways of finding out when the best time in the month to conceive is (see p.16).

**Q** We have been trying for a baby for nearly a year and nothing has happened. I am wondering if it could be my fault.

**A** First of all, it is not a good idea to start feeling guilty. Stress and anxiety can really count against conception so stop blaming yourself. Your first port of call should be to see your doctor either together or separately if you prefer. They will find out about your general health and give you some advice. In the meantime try to cut down on alcohol, wear loose fitting underwear and if you are in a job where you sit for long periods of time, aim to stand up regularly. All these simple measures can increase your sperm count, although it can take a few months for the effects to kick in.

**Q** My wife is worried because I work with pesticides. Can this make a difference?

**A** Some types of work do carry health risks and can make a difference to a man's sperm. You will need to get the facts about the products that you are using. The best way is to contact the manufacturer directly or if you are employed to ask the company's health and safety officer. You could also seek advice from the Health and Safety Executive ([www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)) The products will probably be safe, but you will need to follow the safety precautions to the letter. This may mean wearing protective clothing, masks and also washing hands and equipment thoroughly.