

boost your fertility.

One in six couples struggle with infertility. **Laura Greaves** reveals how natural therapies can improve your odds of conceiving a bouncing bub.

According to Access, Australia's infertility support service, 15 percent of couples of reproductive age have fertility problems. While in 80 percent of cases there's a proven medical cause – such as hormonal or autoimmune conditions, or endometriosis – 20 percent of infertile couples simply don't know why they can't conceive. What's more, a quarter of them have more than one reason for their infertility.

"Infertility is much more common than we would imagine, and it's certainly more common than the number of couples who eventually end up being treated would suggest," says Harvard Medical School's Dr Jorge Chavarro, co-author of *The Fertility Diet* (\$29.95, McGraw-Hill). "And it's also a relatively new concept to think that you can modify your fertility via changes in your diet and lifestyle."

COLA DRINKS COMPROMISE SPERM



According to a study in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, there is a negative relationship between the high consumption of cola drinks – defined as 1020ml or over 800mg of caffeine daily – and semen quality. Caffeine from other sources, including coffee, had less of an effect on semen.

Feeding the bump

"Nutrition is important for fertility, particularly if we include not only diet but also body weight," Chavarro says. "Aiming for a healthy body weight is a good way to prepare for falling pregnant." With over half of Australia's adult population now classified as overweight or obese, this will mean losing weight for most people. "If you're overweight, you are really on your way to infertility," says naturopath and herbalist Narelle Stegehuis from Melbourne's Bump Fertility clinic. "Every 5kg that you lose increases your fertility by about 15 percent. The first and foremost thing women should do is cut out junk and eat food that is as close to its natural state as possible." However, being too thin also affects fertility, as it can hinder ovulation. Ideally, your Body Mass Index (BMI) should be between 20 and 25.

Trans fatty acids are bad news because they increase insulin resistance, which disrupts the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. Avoiding them is made difficult by the fact that Australian and New Zealand food manufacturers are not legally required to list them on labels. As a rule of thumb, avoid processed and convenience foods and any products that list hydrogenated oils or vegetable shortening as ingredients. A high-GI diet has a similar effect. "Conditions associated with infertility, like polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), are linked to insulin resistance," says Chavarro. "Eat whole grains, fruits and vegetables, rather than refined carbohydrates. It's easy to replace a high-GI item with a low-GI version of the same food."

BABY-MAKING THERAPIES

Acupuncture: Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners believe infertility is caused by an energy imbalance that can be resolved with acupuncture, while Western medicine says it also increases blood flow to the uterus and ovaries, and reduces stress.

Hypnotherapy: Stress reduction promotes fertility, and hypnotherapy can help to address anxiety, negativity, and self esteem issues.

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD): The lymphatic system helps the body to expel waste and circulate hormones. MLD is a gentle form of massage that promotes detoxification and rebalances the body's systems.

Mineral therapy: Naturopath Lizzie D'Avigdor uses potassium chloride, or Celloid Mineral PC73 a lot in her practice, especially for tricky problems like polycystic ovary syndrome. "It makes sense, because it helps to alkalise over-acid mucus secretions which create a hostile environment for sperm."

Yoga: "Yoga builds physical and emotional health in a prospective parent," says yoga teacher Sue Hawkins. "Certain poses – such as the inversions and twists that open the hips up and increase the circulation of blood in the pelvic area – may even help conception to occur."

TOP FERTILITY FOODS



Pumpkin seeds



Sunflower seeds



Pistachio seeds



Garlic



Honey



Cinnamon



Avocado



Whole grains



Lentils



Green leafy vegetables



Brown rice



Cold-water fish

Eating well not only improves your chances of falling pregnant, it helps to ensure that you have a healthy pregnancy with a lower risk of common complications, such as gestational diabetes, and better obstetric outcomes as well. Chavarro says, "There are few times in life when people are as aware of what they're eating and their environment as when they're pregnant or trying to get pregnant. It's a very good opportunity to get on the bandwagon of healthy eating throughout your life."

Herbal help

Stegehuis uses fertility-boosting herbs and vitamin supplements. These include: **Tribulus**, which "helps to balance oestrogen levels and normalise ovulation," she explains. "In men, it increases sperm volume and motility and also helps enable penetration of the cervical mucus by the sperm so that they can do what they're meant to do." **Rehmannia, wild yam and false unicorn root** for women who suffer premature ovarian failure. "If a woman only ovulates every few cycles, we'd look at decreasing her ovulation antibodies."

Paeonia, gymnema, and blue cohosh, which can be useful in treating PCOS, particularly in women who are overweight.

Chavarro also recommends that women take a daily multivitamin containing 400mcg of folic acid and iron. The study that formed the basis of his book found that women who took a daily folic acid supplement had a 40 percent lower risk of ovulation problems.

What about men?

Infertility is not just a female problem. In around 40 percent of infertile couples, the problem lies with the man, while in a further 20 percent both partners have problems. Chavarro says body weight is a key factor, with both underweight and overweight men having greatly reduced sperm quality. Men with a low sperm count may also benefit from folic acid and zinc. "A greater folic acid intake is associated with higher sperm concentration," he says.

He adds that it makes "a lot of biological sense" that folic acid should benefit men, because it's an important element in the production of DNA. "There are few

IT WORKED FOR ME



Chiropractic care

Melbourne-based author and TV presenter Andi Lew, 36, knew her family history of early menopause could make conception difficult, so she turned to her chiropractor husband Warren Sipser. The couple welcomed son Beauty Shae in December.

"My family has a history of early menopause. My mum and grandma both lost their periods at 30 and always warned me to not leave falling pregnant too late. But I knew the chiropractic care that I was having would help to increase my fertility - research shows that removing nerve system interference through chiropractic adjustments can change the way your body functions. If the nerves that supply your reproductive organs are 'choked', you aren't giving yourself the best chance of conceiving.

"I also took a high-dose magnesium powder, which my husband prescribed. The uterus is a muscle, so making sure that you're not magnesium-deficient and that your muscles are able to expand and contract properly is very important. You want to make sure the uterus is a healthy environment and functions at its best. I also avoid alcohol, caffeine, dairy, artificial sweeteners, and I eat mainly organic food. I always try the natural option first. I don't use medication and haven't had even a Panadol in nine years!"



Yoga

Marketing manager-turned-yoga teacher Merrin Morrison, 33, says yoga gave her a new perspective on her fertility struggles. "In my mid-twenties I exercised excessively and 'burned the candle at both ends'. I developed chronic insomnia, digestive problems

and stopped menstruating. I had to make some drastic changes, as my husband and I wanted to try for a baby, so I gained a little weight, changed jobs and, most importantly, discovered the benefits of SomaChi Yoga and meditation.

"After nearly five years of not menstruating, my cycle returned. However, it was erratic, which made trying to conceive difficult. I believe my fertility problems are due to a lifestyle that consistently had my body and mind in a hyper-vigilant state. My body was incredibly unbalanced. I've always been a firm believer in alternative medicine, so I tried to boost my fertility with the help of a naturopath and acupuncturist. I also used kinesiology, massage and Reiki.

"I was so amazed at the transformation in my health through SomaChi, that I'm now a SomaChi Yoga and Prenatal Yoga Teacher. It has created a huge transformation in how I now think about having a baby. I've developed more self-acceptance and I now understand that bringing a baby into this world is something I cannot control. The journey of trying to conceive is such a rollercoaster ride of emotions, anything that helps you to create balance in your life is beneficial."

"A clean egg will not flourish in a dirty body," says medical herbalist Miriam Young. **"Detoxification is the most important element of pre-conception care."**

tissues that divide as rapidly as the cells that give rise to sperm and you need a constant supply of DNA in order to keep producing them," he explains. A handful of studies also indicate that increased soy and omega-3 consumption may be associated with higher sperm counts, though Chavarro says these links require further research.

Beating the clock

The biggest contributing factor to infertility is age. Around 20 percent of first-time mothers in Australia are now aged 35 or older. As women grow older, the chance of falling pregnant is lower and the chance of having a miscarriage is higher. The chance of becoming pregnant after the age of 40 is only five percent per menstrual cycle, compared to about 20 percent per cycle in women under 40. So can natural treatments still be effective if age is not on your side?

Chavarro believes the answer is yes. "The average age of women in our study was 32, so these were not young women in terms of reproductive age," he says. "We specifically looked at whether success with natural treatments was different for younger women and older women and, as far as we can tell, there isn't any difference."

Stegehuis agrees – but adds that older women must be prepared to be more diligent in their efforts. "There's this 'I want it and I want it now' mentality, but if you're trying to get pregnant when your body's not ready for it, you really need to work a bit harder," she says. "You should do a pre-pregnancy care program for at least three to six months before you even start trying. If you can wait and really work on that, then your chances of having a viable, healthy pregnancy are much higher."

NEED MORE INFO?

Bump Fertility

Narelle Stegehuis, 1300 133 536,
www.bumpfertility.com.au

Harbord Homoeopathic Clinic

Linlee Jordan, 02 9905 9415,
www.hhcc.com.au

Detox 4 Life

Miriam Young, 07 3279 4816,
www.detox4life.com.au

Byron Bay Yoga

Sue Hawkins, 02 6684 8188,
www.byronbayyoga.com.au

Qi Natural Therapies and Yoga,

Lizzie d'Avigdor, 02 9976 6880,
www.qiyoga.net.au

To find a natural therapist:

www.naturaltherapypages.com.au
www.atms.com.au
www.australiannaturaltherapists
association.com.au



Health writer LAURA GREAVES is a doting godmother and aunt. Contact her at laura@lauragreaves.com.

CAN HOMOEOPATHY HELP?



"I see women who have done the rounds – they've been to the naturopath, the doctor, the specialist, the IVF clinic," says homoeopath Linlee Jordan. "They're emotionally raw: exhausted, angry, and vulnerable. When these issues are healed, diet and supplements all work better."

Homoeopathic medicines are prescribed according to emotional and physical symptoms. For example, *Folliculinum* helps 'post-Pill' infertility, *Borax* is given for a history of candida, and *Nat mur* clears unresolved grief. "When a woman experiences constant failure, loss and self-criticism, she builds a hard shell around herself. *Nat mur* is one of the most poignant remedies, because it often triggers a huge emotional release – a teary phone call to a sister or mum that she fell out with years ago, for example."

Jordan's favourite remedy is *Cimicifuga*. "It has a broad hormone-balancing action, and deals with feelings of being trapped. I gave it to a patient who was so incredibly discouraged that she believed everything she did was jinxed. She's just had a baby. I'm not saying my remedy was the only reason she conceived – but I do believe it helped."

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