

# Taking a Proactive Approach to Conception

**W**hen you're struggling to get pregnant, it might seem as if you're the only one who's having a tough time. But according to the American Fertility Association, 7.3 million women in the U.S. have some kind of difficulty trying to conceive.

Even the healthiest woman can take steps to improve her chances, says Ethan Lynette, a partner in Fairhaven Health, a specialty supplier of natural fertility and pregnancy products in Bellingham, Washington. Here's how:

- \* Know your body. Many women spend years trying to prevent pregnancy, but are at a loss when it comes time to start a family, says Amos Grunebaum M.D., director of obstetrics and the chief of labor and delivery at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital and the Weill Cornell Medical Center in

Manhattan. "Do you really understand your own cycle?" he asks. "Do you know when you ovulate? Do you know which are the only fertile days that you can achieve pregnancy? Has your partner been tested for sperm count, motility? These are basic questions, and surprisingly, many don't know the answers."

Learning when you're ovulating is critical. Ovulation occurs when the ovary releases an egg, which is then available for fertilization. Some at-home testing products like OvaCue and Fertile Focus, detect changes in the saliva. Other methods involve look for changes in urine. Ovulation can also be measured by taking your basal body temperature every morning – it rises about one degree after you've started ovulating.

Still another method of determining

fertility is to examine the cervical mucus. A woman can do that by using clean, dry fingers or toilet paper to collect and examine the mucus in her cervix, which changes throughout her cycle. During ovulation, the amount of cervical fluids increases significantly and resembles raw egg whites. L-arginine, an amino acid, can help promote the production of cervical mucus by stimulating the body to make nitric oxide, a natural vasodilator.

- \* Get the right nutrients. Any woman who is contemplating getting pregnant should start taking vitamins. "Many women don't realize that pregnancy and proper prenatal nutrition should optimally begin prior to your conception efforts," Grunebaum says.

Of special importance

is folic acid, a B vitamin that helps prevent neural tube defects like spina bifida. Other essential nutrients include iron, omega-3 fatty acids, calcium, magnesium and vitamins A, B6, B12 and E.

Certain herbal remedies may be necessary, too. Chasteberry, also called vitex, is an herb that may help restore hormonal imbalances. "It helps them get back on track and regulate their cycles, especially if they have PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome) or other hormonal problems," Lynette says.

Men dealing with infertility may benefit from natural remedies, too. More specifically, they may consider taking L-carnitine, an amino acid that may improve

a man's sperm count and motility.

- \* Reduce stress. While the science on whether stress can cause infertility is uncertain, one thing is for sure: stress can upset the menstrual cycle. Stress can also affect other aspects of health, including diet and sleep.

To keep stress in check, look for healthy outlets such as yoga. "The benefits of yoga on stress reduction are well-established, and reducing anxiety about achieving pregnancy can actually increase chances of conception," says Kelly Andrews, founder and CEO of Fairhaven Health. Other outlets include tai chi, meditation, hobbies and spending time with friends.