

Do You Know As Much About Your Fertility As You Think You Do?

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Women's health expert Toni Weschler wrote a book 20 years ago called *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*, after recognizing that women were fed up with not knowing the ins and outs of their inner workings. "This vital information was never part of their high school education," she explains, "let alone something that their doctors shared with them." Her book set out to change that. And while it has arguably never been easier to track fertility, thanks to a host of apps, a surprising number of women still aren't fully oriented with the facts. This year, as *Taking Charge of Your Fertility* celebrates two decades in print, Weschler has entered the fertility-app world, working with one called OvaGraph, which was developed in partnership with Fairhaven Health and charts fertility indicators like body temperature, cervical mucus, frequency of sex and more. "We developed this tool to be as inclusive as possible for all women in any stage of their journey," says Weschler. We asked her a few questions about fertility's misunderstood history and how apps are changing the game.

Q: What prompted you to write *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*?

A: I had an epiphany one day after witnessing the reaction of hundreds of women who took my Fertility Awareness seminars back in the '80s and '90s. Virtually every one of them would confess something that would usually start out along the lines of, "You know, this is going to sound really strange, but..." And inevitably they would tell me how they were initially incredibly excited when they first took my seminar, but that excitement evolved into anger when they realized how many years they had lived not understanding the most fundamental things about their bodies.

Q: Women aren't taught that sort of thing.

A: The bottom line is that 20 years ago the most women typically knew about their cycles was that they had periods and it might be a good idea to record it on a calendar. **Now I hope women finally understand that the main event of every cycle is ovulation—not menstruation—and the implications for that paradigm shift is huge.**

Q: As far the timing of your book, not only was there a need, but you benefited from the birth of the Internet.

A: When I finally decided to write my book 20 years ago, it was incredibly fortuitous that it happened to be when the Internet was just starting to become popular. The biggest change I've witnessed in fertility education since then has been that the web catapulted my book's message, which in turn has helped propel the concept of charting cycles—and cervical fluid in particular—into the mainstream. This is incredibly gratifying given that before the Internet, I'd usually be met with a blank stare when I mentioned anything to do with charting a woman's cycle.

How did you contribute specifically to the development of OvaGraph?

A: OvaGraph was already a wonderful fertility-charting tool focused primarily on helping women who are trying to conceive. When I partnered with them, we worked on adding the things that make my method unique. It has been fully overhauled to be a complement to my book and to include the ability to chart according to the Fertility Awareness Method. These are the very things that make it so valuable and different than all other charting tools available today.

Q: What are the top two questions that women ask you about fertility and understanding it better?

A: "When do women ovulate?" is the most common question I get asked. If the answer were a simple "on day 14," there would be no need for me to have written a book or for women to chart! For that matter, there would be no reason for women to have their hormones tested or to have ultrasounds during different times in their cycle. But, alas, women aren't Barbie dolls. They may ovulate at different times than their neighbor, or they may ovulate at different times within their own cycles.

Q: It can be complicated.

A: Another question I am often asked is: Do I really need to wait a year in order to see a doctor if I am trying to get pregnant? The answer is no, especially if you are over 35. Regardless, that common wisdom is for the average couple who have no idea when the woman is ovulating and most fertile. But if you have learned how to chart and have timed intercourse perfectly for several cycles and have still not gotten pregnant, your partner should have a sperm analysis. Assuming it is normal, you should get tested within a few months of timing intercourse perfectly based on your charts.

Q: What are a few common misconceptions about fertility and reproductive health in general that you often encounter?

A: Women ovulate on day 14. Vaginal secretions usually indicate an infection. Women cannot get pregnant during their period. If you have periods, it means you are ovulating. Women are fertile throughout their cycle. Women are only fertile one day per cycle.

Q: What do new tracking devices like OvaGraph mean for women looking to get a better handle on their fertility health?

A: To be honest, the proliferation of these tracking devices are a mixed blessing. While some are wonderful, many of them are nothing more than a high-tech version of the ineffective rhythm method. At a minimum, in order to be useful they should allow you to input your two primary fertility signs: cervical fluid and waking temperatures. If they don't, all they can really do is predict when you will be fertile based on your past cycles, which for all intents and purposes is not very valuable.

Q: How can we make sure the app we use is delivering?

A: In order to judge whether an app is reliable, it should allow you to input your primary fertility signs, as well as other secondary fertility signs, such as ovulatory pain. Those that only include temps cannot indicate when ovulation is about to occur, but only confirm if ovulation has already happened. To know on a daily basis whether or not you are fertile, you need to observe and record your cervical fluid, which is critical for both contraceptors and pregnancy achievers.

Q: Do you think all the apps out there now can breed laziness when it comes to keeping tabs on fertility?

A: My greatest fear with the abundance of these apps on the Internet is if they are relied upon for birth control, the results could be disastrous. For starters, women should never rely on just an app for avoiding pregnancy. They should read a comprehensive book, such as *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*, and take a fertility awareness class or have a private consultation with an instructor in order to have a thorough understanding of how to chart their fertility signs, as well as how to apply the rules for avoiding pregnancy. Then and only then should they use a tracking device. Ultimately, fertility apps can be amazing, but should be used only as a convenient way to always have your charts with you. They are certainly not a replacement for proper education.

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