



# UNDERSTANDING FERTILITY

## FOR WOMEN OVER 35

Fertility is the ability to conceive and produce babies. A successful pregnancy depends on many factors, and challenges with becoming or staying pregnant are very common and can stem from one or both partners. This brochure will discuss issues women over the age of 35 may face when trying to get pregnant.

A woman's ability to get pregnant depends on the health of her ovaries and their ability to produce eggs (ovulate), the openness of her fallopian tubes (to allow the egg to travel), the ability of her uterus to allow a fertilized egg to burrow (implant), the release of the right hormones at the right time of the menstrual cycle, and other factors.

With age, changes occur that can shift the balance of fertility in different ways.

### Facts about women's fertility

- Women are born with all the eggs they will ever have. The number of eggs starts to decrease early in life for reasons that we don't fully understand.
- Fertility begins with puberty and the onset of periods (on average between 11 and 13 years).
- After puberty occurs, women start to ovulate and release an egg with each menstrual cycle. Pregnancy can occur if sex happens around ovulation.
- Menstrual cycles are generally every 25–35 days.
- As women age, menstrual cycles get shorter. This usually begins when women are in their late 30s.
- With age, the quantity and quality of eggs goes down.
- Menopause marks the end of regular menstrual cycles (on average around 50 years of age).
- Reproductive potential begins to decrease about 10 years before the start of menopause.

### Indicators of fertility

- Egg quality is very important, and is directly related to how well the embryo will implant into the uterus and the possibility of miscarriage.
- Fallopian tubes must be open. Scarring in the fallopian tubes—for example, from endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, or sexually transmitted infections—might prevent eggs from reaching the uterus. For a quick guide to women's reproductive anatomy, visit [bedsider.org](http://bedsider.org).

### What is infertility in women?

Infertility is defined differently depending on a woman's age:

- For women under 35: 12 months of trying to conceive via frequent sex without birth control.
- For women over 35: 6 months of trying to conceive via frequent sex without birth control.



## What can health care providers offer?

Providers can help diagnose fertility problems and provide solutions to increase the chance of pregnancy, including:

- Blood tests to check levels of hormones (like **follicle stimulating hormone** and **anti-Müllerian hormone**) to assess a woman's response to fertility treatment and her ability to conceive.
- Hysterosalpingogram: An X-ray with dye which can confirm whether the fallopian tubes are open.
- In vitro fertilization (IVF): A provider removes the eggs and a lab fertilizes them with sperm. The provider places the fertilized eggs directly into the uterus. IVF may increase the possibility of genetic problems and the chance of having twins or triplets.
- Intrauterine insemination (IUI): A provider injects prepared sperm directly into the uterus during ovulation.

## What are some ways to improve chances of pregnancy at home?

- Timed intercourse (sex): To increase the chance of pregnancy, the best time to have sex is the day of ovulation and within 24 hours later.
- Use an over-the-counter ovulation predictor kit to test urine for hormones that go up when ovulation is about to begin.
- Avoid over-the-counter vaginal lubricants. These can affect the ability of sperm to reach the egg. Mineral oil or any kind of vegetable oil are good substitutes.
- To boost your chances of conceiving and having a healthy pregnancy, ask your provider about ways to help you and your partner avoid smoking and drinking. Smoking decreases fertility, so avoid smoking to increase your chance of getting pregnant. Studies have found a link between heavy alcohol use and longer time to conceive.
- Talk to your health care provider about improving your health and managing any medical conditions like hepatitis C, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, or asthma. Make sure all vaccines (shots) and screening tests (like Pap smears) are up to date for you and your partner.

## Additional information for women over 40

- Women over 40 have an increased possibility of miscarriage because the number and quality of eggs decline with age.
- Women who are pregnant after age 40 have a higher chance of pregnancy complications like high blood pressure and preeclampsia, and their providers may suggest additional monitoring during pregnancy.
- Talk to your health care provider and seek support to become pregnant and maintain a healthy pregnancy in your 40s. Many women in their 40s have successful pregnancies.

*The information discussed here can also be found in this [video](#).*

