Healthy pregnancies sometimes can be difficult to achieve. It is estimated that infertility affects 1 out of 10 women. While some medical interventions, drugs and high-tech medical procedures may improve fertility, a safer, more natural approach of optimum nutrition and lifestyle changes may increase pregnancy success rates. Research suggests that healthy diets are tied to fertility health for both men and women, yet diet is an often-overlooked component of fertility. Simple healthy changes in lifestyle, diet and exercise habits can be important influences in pregnancy success rates and infant health outcomes. One of the major obstacles interfering with fertility is obesity and roughly 25 percent of women in reproductive age are obese.

**Importance of Achieving a Healthy Weight**

Overweight and obese women have a reduced probability of getting pregnant. Being overweight or underweight with too little or too much body fat may interfere with a woman’s fertility. For overweight women, weight loss may help regularize menstrual cycles and increase the chance of spontaneous ovulation and conception. The good news is that as little as a 5–10% weight loss may help improve fertility outcomes.

**Trying to Conceive Diet Strategies**

Pre-conception nutrition is a vital part of preparing for pregnancy. A healthy diet rich in nutrients may help improve ovulation, fertility and offer an excellent start to a pregnancy. A natural approach to promote fertility focuses on achieving a healthy weight, improving dietary quality, insulin regulation and hormonal balance. These strategies won’t guarantee a pregnancy; they usually are without negative side effects and are the foundation of a healthy eating strategy for motherhood and beyond.

The following is a recommended fertility diet pattern to consider and discuss with your doctor that may promote increased fertility in otherwise healthy individuals:

- Eat three or more nutrient-rich meals daily that meet your calorie requirements.
- Eat foods from all food groups, including fruits and vegetables, whole grain carbohydrates, healthy fats, low-fat dairy, plant (beans, nuts, soy) and lean animal protein.
- Choose more natural foods.
- Eat at least 12 ounces of low-mercury fish and no more than 6 ounces of canned albacore tuna weekly. Fish is the best source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are critical to a baby’s brain development.
- Avoid trans fats and use more unsaturated fats (vegetable oils, avocados, nuts, fatty fish); this may reduce insulin sensitivity and cool inflammation. Limit saturated fats.
- Eat more plant protein and less animal protein. Replace one serving of meat daily with a plant protein source.
- Enjoy whole milk or moderate quantities of full fat ice cream or yogurt daily.
- Choose carbohydrates that are high in fiber and slowly digested to help control blood sugar and insulin levels.

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**Foods That Make You Fertile:**

**Nutritional Information for Women and Men**

*Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RD*
- Take a multi-vitamin and get an extra 400 micrograms per day of folic acid. All women capable of getting pregnant should consume 400 mcg of folic acid daily from fortified foods or supplements.

- Get plenty of iron. The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggests improving iron status by choosing foods that supply heme iron (lean red meat, eggs) which is more readily absorbed by the body and enhances absorption of vitamin C rich foods.

- Drink more water and skip sugary foods and beverages.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that at no time during pregnancy is it safe to drink alcohol.

- Daily physical activity within your comfort zone and always talk with your doctor before starting an exercise program while pregnant.

These recommendations generally echo those of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and other Federal healthcare agencies. A healthy whole food diet like The Mediterranean diet may also be effective.

**Foods and Behaviors to Avoid**

There are several foods that are generally not recommended for mother or baby during conception or pregnancy. High-fat foods, trans fats, refined sugars, overly processed foods, too much salt, caffeine and sugary foods and beverages; these tend to be nutrient poor and not recommended. Foods with many additives, preservatives, chemicals and artificial sweeteners should be taken with caution.

Soft cheeses and pates, foods that may contain high levels of listeria, should be avoided. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Academy of Pediatrics and CDC recommend no smoking and reduction of alcohol intake before and during pregnancy as a part of primary preconception care as well as preventive care.

**Fertility Guidelines for Men**

A growing body of evidence suggests that men's diet and lifestyle may affect fertility, sperm quality and motility. Following a similar dietary pattern as outlined above is highly recommended for men. Just like women, men need to eat a healthy diet, take multi-vitamins, quit smoking, reduce intake of alcohol and achieve a healthy weight. Chronic drinking and smoking is associated with reduced sperm concentration, volume and motility.

Couples are usually highly motivated to make lifestyle changes for the sake of their unborn children. Eliminating risky behaviors, which may be difficult at other times, may become easier with the goal of a much-desired pregnancy.