Dear Alice,

I am a female who knows very little about her body. I was wondering when the optimal times of conceiving were. I know it's somewhere in the middle of my cycle, but when?

My menstrual cycle lasts about thirty days, days one to four being when I have my period. Using this numbering system, can you tell me when I am most likely to conceive?

Thanks a lot,
A female who wants to know

Answer

Dear A female who wants to know,

Getting acquainted with your body is a smart idea whether you're seeking conception or contraception. Since menstruation differs from woman to woman, the optimal time for conception varies, but these guidelines should help you make sense of your cycle.

Women tend to ovulate mid-cycle; however, it is more accurate to say that they ovulate fourteen days before menstruation. Women have been known to ovulate at any time during their cycle, including during menstruation, although this is unusual. In terms of conception, fertility depends on three factors: a healthy egg, healthy sperm, and favorable cervical mucus. A woman ovulates once a cycle. The egg lives 12 to 24 hours and then disintegrates if not fertilized. Under favorable cervical mucus conditions (cervical mucus nourishes and guides the sperm, which would otherwise die in about a half-hour or never reach the egg), sperm can survive as long as five days within the body. These conditions create about a week-long window around the time of ovulation when conception is most likely.
Determining the precise moment of ovulation (and the best time for conception) is a learned science. To find out more about ovulation detection, see Fertility awareness: The symptothermal method [2] in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health [3] archive. Natural family planning combines several observations (regarding the previous menstrual cycle, vaginal fluids, and basal body temperature to name a few) to confirm ovulation. If you want more information about the details of determining your monthly fertility, click to Planned Parenthood [4] to read about "How Pregnancy Happens."

You owe it to yourself to learn as much about your body as possible. Our Bodies, Ourselves [5] (available in print and online) by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective is a great resource for a variety of women's health topics. It may also be a good idea to talk to a trusted health care provider to figure out your ovulation cycle.

Here's to being "in the know" about your body!

Alice!

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