I want to be fertile when I'm ready to have a baby

Dear Alice,

I've heard so many horror stories of women who wait until their mid-thirties or later to have children, then find out that they are infertile. I'm 25 years old now and nowhere near getting married or having babies, yet I don't want this to happen to me when I'm ready. What can I do now to protect my fertility and make sure I am able to conceive when the time is right? It's causing me a lot of anxiety!!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you for thinking ahead and planning when to be a parent. Many factors influence a woman's fertility, whether it's age, or lifestyle, or any medical condition you may have. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees when it comes to fertility, but you can be proactive by practicing healthy lifestyle behaviors. Additionally, recognizing what factors you have control over, and what options you have when you can't control the outcome, may help to decrease some of the anxiety you have surrounding infertility.

While you can't reverse the aging process, and you have little say about your genetic predisposition to certain medical conditions, you can follow some healthy lifestyle tips that may help support and preserve your fertility:

- **Schedule regular medical check-ups** to allow for early detection and treatment of any conditions or diseases, such as [polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)](https://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/AskAlice/Health/PolycysticOvarianSyndrome.html), that affect hormone levels and fertility. During your checkups, you can also talk with your health care provider about any concerns you have regarding your fertility.
- **Maintain a healthy body weight** for overall health and balanced hormone levels. Fertility may be influenced by body fat and too little or too much can factor into a person's ability to conceive.
- **Practice safer sex** to avoid any fertility problems related to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These types of infections can be asymptomatic and, therefore, may be left untreated. In women, these untreated infections can spread to the upper genital tract, creating scar tissue that damages the fallopian tubes. Male and female condoms, when used correctly and consistently, are effective at preventing STI transmission. If you don't know your partner's STI status, you can talk to them about getting tested just to be sure.
- **Eat a nutritious diet.** While there isn't research that indicates any specific foods that promote fertility, eating a balanced diet promotes overall health. For those with celiac disease [3], it's advised to make sure it doesn't go untreated, as it can affect fertility.

In addition to practicing these healthy behaviors, supporting fertility by limiting or avoiding certain activities may be in order. These can include excessive drinking, smoking, vigorous physical activity, and exposure to toxins.

While these factors may influence a women's ability to conceive, infertility (the inability to become pregnant, despite trying for one year in women under the age of 35 or six months in women 35 years and older) could also be a result of getting older. While some women in their thirties and forties have no trouble getting pregnant, it's recognized that fertility decreases with age. Women are born with a certain number of eggs, and since no new eggs are formed throughout a woman's lifetime, the number of eggs, and quality of mature eggs, declines each year. Every woman's body is different, so how they age, how they take care of themselves, and genetics all factor into fertility. Therefore, it's unfortunately not so simple to predict how fertile you will be when you're ready to conceive.

Lastly, it could be helpful to think about where your worry originates. Are you worried about having a child of your own? If this is what keeps you up at night, you can rest assured that there are many ways to love a child regardless of your fertility or partner status. This may include (but isn't limited to) being an involved and caring family member to the younger folks in your clan, being an inspiring mentor, teacher, tutor, or even a loving and supportive foster or adoptive parent. Or, is your concern about having control over big life changes? Chatting with a trusted friend, family member, member of the clergy, or even a mental health professional may help you sort out your thoughts on the subject. Lastly, if your biggest worries have to do with any medical issues associated with infertility, your best bet is to follow up with your health care provider. Whatever the case may be, realizing what your priority is when it comes to fertility may help get an action plan together and to put your mind at ease.

Alice!
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Published date: Apr 16, 2004
Last reviewed on: Jan 29, 2016