Can you get pregnant the first time? [1]

Dear Alice,

Can you get pregnant the first time?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The short answer is yes, you can absolutely get pregnant the first time. And many women have. Fertility, however, can be a fickle thing. Some women wanting desperately to conceive must try for months or years sometimes before success. Other women with no desire to get pregnant can unexpectedly conceive the first time (or anytime) they have sex.

Any time a man and a woman have intercourse, pregnancy is possible (of course, the chance of pregnancy is greatly reduced if you are using an effective method of birth control). All that needs to happen is for a sperm to get to an egg. Even if a young woman has never menstruated, she might have just ovulated (released an egg) for the first time. This would make her fertile and pregnancy possible. Anytime a couple has unprotected sex, in addition to pregnancy, they are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, or STIs. Condoms, when used correctly and every time, offer protection against pregnancy and STIs. Many other forms of birth control are available as well, check out the Contraception [2] category in the Go Ask Alice! archives for more information.

Your question provides the perfect opportunity to expand on the wonders of fertility and conception. Here's how the magic happens. In a normal menstrual cycle, a woman's pituitary gland secretes hormones that stimulate the ovaries to release an egg. The releasing of the egg is called ovulation, which most often happens in the middle of a cycle, around day 14 of the typical 28-day cycle. The exact timing of ovulation can vary between women? some have 35-day cycles, while others have 20-day cycles, with most women having cycles between 26 to 32 days long. The length of a woman's menstrual cycle can vary month to month due to stress, illness, travel, living with other women, or other factors. After ovulation the released egg travels down a fallopian tube where it has about 24 hours to unite with a sperm. Since sperm cells can survive in a woman's reproductive tract for up to three to five days, a woman can get pregnant if she has sex on the day she ovulates or on the days leading up to ovulation.

Once fertilized, an egg moves to the uterus, where it attaches to the uterine lining and begins to grow. Only after attaching to the uterine lining is the woman pregnant. She may begin to experience early pregnancy symptoms and her periods will (almost always) stop. If the egg is
not fertilized in the fallopian tube it will break down and signal the uterine lining to shed, and menstruation will occur.

Fertility basically comes down to this: you're most likely to get pregnant if you have unprotected sex when you're ovulating or on the days just before ovulation. Determining when you're ovulating is another matter; many women do not have completely regular cycles, and need to read their bodies for signs of ovulation rather than relying on the calendar. Whether or not you want to become pregnant, you may find it useful to learn to recognize the times when you're most fertile. You can learn more about the menstrual cycle and fertility awareness in the Sexual and Reproductive Health category of the Go Ask Alice! archives. You can also speak with a health care provider about your particular menstrual history and cycle.

What's the take home message? Whether having sex in a bed, a hot tub, an airplane, upside down, standing up, or only at it for a minute, as long as there's sperm and an egg, a woman can get pregnant, even if it's her first time.

Alice!
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