Dear Alice,

What have you heard about fertility computers? I've heard European women swear by them. Are they a good birth control option?

Answer

Dear Reader,

We use computers for just about everything nowadays, so why not use them as birth control? Although electronic fertility computers are a relatively new phenomenon, tracking individual fertility to avoid pregnancy has been used for centuries. Throughout a woman's monthly cycle, she has varying levels of fertility and some people choose to use fertility awareness [2] as a natural form of birth control. In the age of technology, some manufacturers are creating gadgets to help women track this, though research on the use of fertility computers as methods of birth control doesn't support their use in this way. For the most part, they're designed to help women who have had difficulties conceiving determine at which point in their cycle they're most likely to get pregnant.

Generally, women are most likely to conceive within one week before they ovulate (when an egg is released from her ovaries), though that doesn't mean that they can't get pregnant at other times. Ovulation occurs for most women about ten to 14 days before they start their period. During this time, a variety of physiological changes occur in the body and fertility computers often rely on monitoring these processes to determine when a woman has the best chances of getting pregnant.

Although there are a variety of different fertility computers out there (ranging in price from $100 to $700 per device to cheap or free Smartphone apps), here are a few ways fertility monitors help determine when a woman's "fertile period" is:

- Calendar calculations. A simple day counting method may be able to determine at what point in her cycle a woman is ovulating and when she is free from pregnancy worries [3].
- Basal body temperature. Measuring body temperature when a woman first wakes up every morning may help identify where in her monthly cycle she is and whether she is ovulating.
- Hormone levels. Through home urine tests, some devices are able to measure the amount of hormones related to fertility to determine where a woman is in her cycle.
If you're considering using a fertility computer, there are certain things that you may want to keep in mind. Firstly, they're not as effective for women whose menstrual cycles are irregular or are more than 35 days long, though devices that rely on urine tests may be effective for women with cycles up to 42 days. Secondly, failure rates vary by device, ranging from 0.6 to six percent. Since the primary purpose of fertility monitors is to determine when a woman is most fertile during her cycle (rather than when she is least fertile), they're not recommended to be used as birth control. Sticking with condoms, hormonal birth control, and other forms of contraception may be most effective in preventing pregnancy.

Computers make life easier in many ways, but when it comes to birth control, they're still working out the glitches.

Alice!
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