

Getting To Positive: Eating for Fertility

BY VICTORIA SHANTA RETELNY, RD, LD

With infertility affecting one in six couples, chances are you or someone you know has had difficulty getting pregnant. Are there certain foods or diets that can prevent female infertility and promote conception? Victoria Shanta Retelny explores the latest research on “fertility diets.”

Conceiving a child involves an intricate interplay of hormones, the quality of sperm and egg, the timing and presence of ovulation and a healthy body weight and fitness level. With all of these factors at work, it's probably not surprising that approximately 10 to 20 percent of couples are affected by infertility during their reproductive lifetime.

There are many potential causes of infertility, but according to a study in the October 2003 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, more than 25 percent of females who have a hard time conceiving have ovulatory disorders.

Recent research and a new book called *The Fertility Diet* (McGraw Hill 2008) propose an eating pattern to lower the risk of ovulatory disorder infertility. The diet emphasizes “healthy fats” such as monounsaturated fats rather than trans fats; vegetable-based protein over animal protein; low glycemic or “slow” carbohydrates; full-fat dairy products with an emphasis on whole milk and ice cream; and prenatal multivitamins with adequate amounts of folic acid and iron.

Evidence for a specific pattern of eating related to fertility came from a study published in the November 2007 *Obstetrics and Gynecology* in which a cohort of more than 17,500 women participated in the Nurses' Health Study II. The female participants did not have a history of infertility and were trying to get pregnant or became pregnant over an eight-year period.

The research revealed a positive association between the proposed “fertility diet” (along with lifestyle modifications such as regular physical activity) and the prevention of ovulatory disorders in otherwise healthy women.

“The most important point is that relatively simple changes to diet and lifestyle can have a profound effect on fertility,” says Jorge E. Chavarro, MD, ScD, research fellow in the department of nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health, who co-authored *The Fertility Diet* with Walter Willett, MD, PhD, and Patrick J. Skerrett.

But Laurence A. Jacobs, MD, reproductive endocrinologist and partner at the Fertility Centers of Illinois, cautions not to take the study's findings out of context. Although there may be associations between certain dietary patterns and improved ovulatory fertility, he says, no large randomized trials have been conducted on the cause and effect of diet on infertility in women.

“There are so many complicating variables that we don’t know what the best diets are for everyone,” says Jacobs. Instead, most fertility experts emphasize modifying extremes.

“As with most cases, any extreme is not good,” advises Jacobs. “Being significantly underweight or overweight makes it difficult to ovulate.”

However, it is not just the number on the scale but a patient’s body composition — lean tissue which includes muscle, bone and organs versus fat tissue — that counts.

Some of Jacobs’ overweight infertility patients wear adjustable weight vests to help them increase muscle mass, burn more calories, lose weight and improve their chances of conception, according to the Winter 2007 *Fertility Today*.

Ovulation also can be thwarted by a health condition called polycystic ovarian syndrome. More than half of the women diagnosed with PCOS are overweight or obese, according to the February 2008 *Nutrition in Clinical Practice*.

“A lot of women with PCOS binge eat. Studies support that women who stop bingeing regulate their menstrual cycles better,” explains Angela Grassi, MS, RD, LDN, author of *The Dietitian’s Guide to Polycystic Ovary Syndrome* (Luca Publishing 2007).

Obesity coupled with PCOS can result in the physiological phenomenon of insulin resistance, in which the cells of the body are no longer as sensitive to insulin.

“Because muscle cells utilize insulin better with activity, I recommend some type of daily movement to my patients,” explains Grassi. In addition, to avoid surges in blood sugar and insulin levels, high-fiber whole grains or “slow carbs,” which take longer to digest, are recommended over high-sugar, refined carbohydrates or “fast carbs” like regular soda, white bread and potatoes.

While in some cases fertility appears to be affected by, if not contingent on, the quality of one’s diet, the expert consensus is that more research is needed in this area.

However, notes Chavarro: “Our fertility diet recommendations are unlikely to cause harm to women who wish to try them and may, on the other hand, help them achieve the goal of becoming pregnant and serve as a guideline on how to continue a healthy diet afterwards.”

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