

Boost your fertility by eating right



By DR NAVDEEP SINGH PANNU

NUTRITION 🔒

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Both men and women should practise a healthy lifestyle, including eating a nutritious and balanced diet, in order to maximise their chances of getting pregnant. — NORLIDAH RAMLI/The Star

There is significant data to suggest that the relationship between nutrition and fertility is consequential in promoting conception.

Results from studies examining the role nutrition plays in improving fertility in men and women underpin that healthy food choices can positively affect the state of reproductive functions.

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Even more pertinent is mounting evidence that couples with good nutritional profiles had a healthy pregnancy and positive foetal development.

Researchers from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Harvard Medical School in the United States recently published research done on the impact of diet on fertility.

Their findings reaffirmed that nutrients such as folic acid, vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids, as well as diets built on vegetables, fruits, herbs, nuts, beans and whole grains, had a positive impact on women attempting to get pregnant naturally.

The same dietary prescription was also found to improve the quality of semen among men.

Conversely, unhealthy diets such as those rich in red and processed meats, potatoes, sweets and sweetened drinks were found to be negative for fertility health in both genders.



STARPICKS

SOWING THE SEEDS OF COLLABORATION

With couples undergoing assisted reproductive techniques, it was found that women may be more likely to conceive if they are on an antioxidant-rich diet.

A study conducted in Netherlands on pre-conception diets and their association with the chances of getting pregnant in women undergoing fertility treatment, suggested that obese women and men (defined as having a body mass index of more than 30) and those suffering from poor nutrition (those with a body mass index of less than 20) could suffer heightened risks of infertility.

Closer to home, studies have revealed that in addition to avoiding certain types of vegetables and fruits due to food taboos or the lack of nutrition knowledge, pregnant women in Malaysia do not consume enough of this important food group.

In some of my own patients, observance of a healthy diet leading to the reduction of 10% of their body weight if they are obese, has led to their success in conceiving naturally.

In other instances, a prescription of supplements taken over a few months, coupled with better dietary choices, seems to have made all the difference.

I have also had cases where husbands have been successful in improving their sperm count simply by observing a healthier diet and exercise.

In fact, the MCO has also brought forth favourable outcomes that illustrate the importance of balancing mind, body and soul.

Quite a number of couples under my care have found themselves in the family way without the need of any assistance during this period.

The increased time spent together at home may have given them the opportunity to reconnect, while the time saved from commuting due to working from home might have given them more time for exercising and preparing healthier home-cooked meals.

What to eat

Aside from factors such as age and genetics, which we cannot control, nutrition is a factor that is well within our purviews to manage.

Simply put, the diet one observes during pregnancy is the same diet that should be practiced before pregnancy. And fathers-to-be are not exempt either!

Fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants and are great for general wellbeing.

The healthier a couple is, the better their chances are to conceive.

Hence, ensure that at least half your plate at every meal is composed of fresh fruits and vegetables of any type, and avoid over-frying your vegetables.

Plant-based fats, taken in moderation, can help promote regular ovulation and general fertility.

Trans fats, on the other hand, should be avoided.

These can be found primarily in foods such as commercial baked and snack foods, animal products, fried foods and certain margarines.

This type of fat can cause insulin resistance that could inhibit ovulation.

Instead, indulge in more complex, but good carbohydrates rich in fibre, like whole grains.

For protein, zinc and iron, eat more eggs, fish and meats that have been trimmed of fat.

Fish and egg yolks are an excellent source of DHA (docosahexanoic acid) and omega-3 fatty acids that help develop a baby's nervous system.

Plant protein from beans, nuts, seeds and tofu are also packed with healthy fats.

Also, consume one or two servings a day of whole milk or other full-fat dairy foods, such as yoghurt, and less of non-and low-fat dairy.

With sugar, less is more and it would be prudent to cut down on sugar intake.

Drink coffee and alcohol in moderation and opt for whole foods over processed options.



I encourage couples – yes, both husband and wife, not just the wife – to take a daily multivitamin that contains at least 400mcg of folic acid and 40 to 80mg of iron, as well as pre-natal vitamins like vitamins C and E, selenium, and zinc.

In addition to what can be ingested, it is encouraged that we get a daily dose of vitamin D3, either by simply stepping out into the sun, especially in the morning, or from supplements if daily sun exposure is not possible.

Adequate intake of this vitamin improves the immune system and enhances fertility potential.



Eating healthy shouldn't just start after you find out you are pregnant, but should begin well before you even think of starting a family. – TNS

Mind and body

In addition to nutrition, stress management is also an important aspect of a healthy lifestyle.

Most of us are prone to work stress and I often advise couples to compartmentalise.

Don't take your work home with you, and vice versa, don't allow home concerns to affect you at work.

Talk to your doctor if you are feeling overwhelmed – don't feel embarrassed or apprehensive about getting help.

Proper and adequate sleep is another important aspect of our general wellbeing.

Alongside repairing damage in our bodies, sleep is our best detox for a balanced hormonal profile.

So be sure to get six to eight hours of quality sleep.

If you are having trouble sleeping, you could take a melatonin supplement an hour or two before going to bed.

Exercise and good nutrition go hand in hand.

At least three 30-minute sessions a week for starters will have you feeling the positive effects.

From high-intensity interval training (HIIT) or swimming to brisk walking around your housing area after work, there are a variety of options you can chose from to best suit your time and physical profiles.

Consult your doctor on the routines that would best fit you.

Plan early

Couples must be aware that getting pregnant is not a given thing in a marriage.

Poor nutritional choices and unhealthy habits may compromise fertility and our chances of building a family.

I would like to encourage couples to consider undergoing a pre-conception consultation even before you decide to have a baby.

This consultation can be done with and by your family doctor to ascertain the state of your general and fertility health.

Any problems can then be detected early on and measures to deal with them can be planned and carried out.

This consultation should be done sooner rather than later, regardless of when you decide to have a baby.

This is as lifestyle alterations usually take some time before any effect is noticed.

It is also imperative for any pre-existing conditions such as asthma, diabetes, oral health and obesity to be effectively controlled in order to maximise your chances of having a baby.

I cannot emphasise enough that a healthy pregnancy begins with a healthy lifestyle.

And it's not just your health that will be affected.

Your child's nutritional profile starts from the womb and is enhanced throughout their lifetime, so your health and nutrition directly affects them from conception onwards.

Be there for one another





Undergoing fertility treatments can be tough physically and psychologically, so it is crucial for couples to support one another all the way. — Positive Parenting

Infertility treatments can be daunting and couples undergoing them may experience worry and insecurity.

The most common fertility treatment side effects are bloating, headache, breast tenderness, upset stomach, hot flashes and mood swings.

This, in addition to the stringent demands of when the drug and procedures must be administered, weigh heavily on one's physical and psychological state.

It is important that couples support each other through this process, alongside observing a healthy lifestyle and diet.

Pregnancy can also be a time of confusing and conflicting emotions, more so for couples who conceive with the help of fertility treatments.

Share these feelings with each other and be assured that you can discuss any issues with your doctor if you feel the need to do so.

Building a family should be an exciting and enriching experience.

Therefore, do surround yourself with the company of family and friends who can help you stay upbeat and optimistic.

On that note, let's strive to get the basics of a healthy lifestyle right, not just for your future family, but also yourselves individually.

I do look forward to the baby photos of 2021.

Dr Navdeep Singh Pannu is a fertility specialist. For more information, email starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational purposes only and should not be considered as medical advice. *The Star* does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. *The Star* disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.

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