

Pregnancy and Ovulation

To become pregnant, a woman needs to have sexual intercourse during the fertile phase of her menstrual cycle. Her fertile phase occurs just before and on the day of ovulation. A woman can find her day of ovulation by using a home ovulation test. She can also test for pregnancy by using a home pregnancy test. Pharmacists can give advice about these tests.

The menstrual cycle

A woman's menstrual cycle begins on the first day of her period (first day of bleeding), and ends on the day before her next period starts. Menstrual cycles are usually between 21 and 40 days long. Only about one in ten women have a 28-day cycle. For some women the length of their cycle (and the day of ovulation) varies each month, while others have a more regular cycle. Even when a woman's cycle is regular, the day of ovulation may vary each month.

There are four main phases of the menstrual cycle, which are controlled by hormones. These phases are:

Menstruation (bleeding or period):

The thickened lining of the uterus (womb) comes away from the uterus wall, and the blood and tissues pass out through the vagina. A period usually lasts from three to seven days.

The follicular phase: Follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) stimulates several follicles (tiny sacs in the ovaries each containing an undeveloped egg) to start developing. One of these follicles forms a mature egg. The ovaries also produce the hormone oestrogen, which causes the lining of the uterus to thicken in preparation for possible pregnancy.

Ovulation: Occurs when the egg is released from the follicle. It is triggered by the rapid release of luteinising hormone (LH) from the pituitary gland.

The released egg travels down the fallopian tube to the uterus. LH is the hormone detected in most ovulation tests.

The luteal phase: After releasing its egg, the remnant of the follicle (called the corpus luteum) produces progesterone (which causes body temperature to rise slightly), and oestrogen. These hormones maintain the thickened lining (endometrium) of the uterus. If a fertilised egg implants in the lining of the uterus, it starts producing a hormone called human chorionic gonadotrophin (hCG), the hormone detected in pregnancy tests. If the egg is not fertilised, progesterone and oestrogen levels drop and the lining of the uterus falls away. Menstruation starts and the cycle begins again.

Tips for falling pregnant

The most important factor when trying to conceive is to have sexual intercourse during the woman's fertile phase. As her egg can live for about 24 hours after ovulation, and sperm can live for three to five days after sexual intercourse, her fertile phase is the five days before ovulation and the day of ovulation. The two most fertile days in each cycle are the day of ovulation and the day before.

Methods for predicting ovulation

- **Measure hormone changes using a home ovulation test.** This is one of the most simple and accurate ways to find the day of ovulation. See 'Home ovulation tests' below.

- **Keep a temperature chart.** A woman's body temperature usually rises slightly after ovulation, so she can get an idea of when she has ovulated by taking her temperature (with a basal thermometer) before getting out of bed every morning. However, as her temperature rises after ovulation has already occurred (too late to get pregnant), this method can only be used to estimate the day of ovulation for the next cycle.
- **Calendar method.** A woman can record the first day of her period over several months and estimate when her fertile days occur.
- **Watch for signs of fertility.** These may start about three weeks before the next period is due and include:
 - increased vaginal discharge that becomes clear and slippery
 - softening and swelling of the genitals (vulva)
 - increased sexual desire
 - slight feeling of discomfort on one side of the abdomen.

Home ovulation tests

A home ovulation test can help a woman find the most fertile days of her cycle. It is important to read and carefully follow the directions provided with the ovulation test kit about how and when to use it.

Urine tests

A urine test can find the two most fertile days of a woman's cycle by measuring the level of luteinising

hormone (LH) in her urine. A woman must test her urine every day (with disposable test sticks) around the estimated time of ovulation, to detect the surge in LH that occurs 24 to 36 hours before ovulation. A woman is most likely to conceive if she has sexual intercourse within one to two days after her LH surge.

Saliva tests

These test kits contain a magnifying lens to examine a sample of saliva for changes that occur a few days before ovulation. Saliva tests are not as reliable as urine tests.

Home pregnancy tests

The level of human chorionic gonadotrophin (hCG) in a woman's body increases rapidly during the first few weeks of pregnancy. Home pregnancy tests check for the presence of hCG in the urine. Tests can usually detect hCG (and therefore pregnancy) by the first day of a missed period. If used correctly, these tests can be very accurate. Some tests can detect hCG up to four days before the period is due, but an early test result should always be checked by re-testing after the period is due.

Some pregnancy tests can detect pregnancy and also tell the woman how long ago she conceived.

Pregnancy testing tips

- It is important to read and carefully follow the instructions provided with the test kit. If the test is not used correctly, the result may not be correct.

Important

A woman who is planning a pregnancy, or has had a positive result from a home pregnancy test, should consult a doctor or nurse as soon as possible for a pregnancy health check.

- It may be helpful to buy a test kit which contains two tests in case the test needs to be repeated.
- Alcohol, pain-relieving medicines, antibiotics and oral contraceptives should not affect a pregnancy test, but some medicines (e.g. fertility medicines) can cause a false result.
- A recent miscarriage may cause a false result, as traces of HCG may be found in urine for up to eight weeks after a miscarriage.

Urine testing technology

There are several different types of urine test sticks that work in different ways. Some test sticks need to be dipped into urine that has been collected in a cup. Some test sticks need to be held in the urine flow during urination. Some urine test sticks show the test result in words or pictures on a digital display. A pharmacist can help you choose a product that suits you.

For more information

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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