

This leaflet is essential reading for all women preparing for pregnancy whether that be with or without the assistance of medical treatment at Merrion Fertility Clinic (MFC). The purpose of this leaflet is to help individuals and couples improve their chances of conception and positively prepare for pregnancy. Couples experiencing fertility problems should be seen together because both partners are affected by decisions surrounding investigations and treatment.

Having trouble getting pregnant? You are not alone.

One in six Irish couples of reproductive age experience difficulties conceiving a child. 84% of couples will conceive within a year of having regular unprotected intercourse. Of those who do not conceive in the first year, about half will do so in the second year. If you & your partner have been trying to become pregnant for 12 months without success, it is time to take positive action.

Fertility, particularly female fertility, declines with age. Success declines markedly for women after the age of 40, with the decline beginning around the age of 36. An older mother may also be at higher risk of developing problems for both herself and the baby during pregnancy.

Why you might have trouble conceiving

Causes of infertility are many and varied and involve male, female or a combination of factors. They include problems with:

- Producing eggs (ovulation) . Producing sperm
- Female pelvic diseases such as endometriosis, damaged fallopian tubes, adhesions or fibroids
- Combination of Male & Female factors.
- In 20% of couples no cause will be found & this is called Unexplained Infertility.

Improving your Chances & Preparing for Pregnancy

- As a female understand your menstrual cycle – the most fertile time is the five days leading up to ovulation. Ovulation usually occurs 2 weeks before your next period. Our bodies are not always predictable however and ovulation timing can vary from month to month.
- Have regular intercourse, i.e. 2- 3 times per week. This may seem obvious but if you are having very infrequent intercourse you are limiting your opportunity for conception. Some couples experience difficulties with intercourse. Should this be the case you should discuss this further with your fertility doctor.
- Healthy diet and a simple multivitamin preparation, including folic acid, for both partners

A balanced diet is the most sensible approach to ensuring that essential vitamins & minerals are obtained, however additional folic acid supplements are essential prior to conception. A number of widely available preparations are available for pregnant women which are suitable for pre- conception use. The majority contain the required 400mcg of Folic Acid.

Folic Acid taken pre-conceptually (3 months is recommended) and up to 12 weeks of pregnancy has been shown to reduce the risk of having a baby born with Spina Bifida. In certain circumstances, a higher dose of Folic Acid may be advised. **Fertility treatments at MFC will not be started unless the female is taking folic acid for the recommended time.**

Men may also wish to take a multivitamin preparation that contains zinc, selenium, L- carnitine & folate.

Some foods are best avoided in pregnancy such as unpasteurised dairy products, raw eggs, shellfish, pate, salami type and other un-cooked cured meats. There is no absolute evidence of an association between consumption of caffeinated drinks (tea, coffee cola etc.) and fertility problems but it we would recommend limiting your intake to less than 6 per day.

- Regular moderate exercise e.g., walking, swimming three times weekly is advised.

- Appropriate Weight

Fertility treatment is only provided @ MFC when the woman's BMI is between 19 – 30.

Body Mass Index (BMI): Is a calculation based on the weight you carry for your height. An optimal BMI of between 19 – 28 is associated with the best chance of pregnancy. Being significantly underweight or over weight may mean it takes longer to conceive & that your chances of conceiving are reduced. Should you be successful in conceiving the risk of complications through pregnancy, labour, delivery and beyond for both mother and baby may be increased.

Women who are not ovulating, or have no periods at all, may find that restoring their weight to the optimal range can restore ovulation & correct disturbances in their menstrual cycle.

- Stop smoking and any recreational drug use.

If you do smoke, you are probably aiming to give up once you & your partner fall pregnant. We strongly advise that you both stop now, even before you conceive. Smoking tobacco has a proven adverse effect on your fertility.. Smoking as little as two cigarettes a day has been associated with a reduction in fertility in both men and women and has been shown to significantly reduce the success rates of fertility treatments such as IVF. Passive smoking may affect a woman's chance of conceiving too. **Smoking prior to and at the time of conception, during pregnancy, and around your baby has a significant negative effect.** We would encourage you to consult your GP for support in stopping smoking.

- Alcohol

Excess alcohol consumption can affect both male and female fertility, as well as harming the developing foetus. Women should be advised to drink no more than one or two units of alcohol no more than one or two times per week and avoid any episode of intoxication. Men should not consume more than 2- 3 units of alcohol 2-3 times per week.

- Where you have any on-going current medical problem or require medication it is essential for you to review this & any possible implications for pregnancy with your relevant medical practitioner. Certain prescriptions, over the counter medications or supplements & other complimentary treatments may not be suitable for use. Please consult your advising medical or alternative practitioner.

Additional requirements & advice when planning for pregnancy

Ensure that you are registered with the National Cervical Screening programme and that you have an up to date normal cervical smear. Ensure that you are immune to Rubella and if not immune arrange for the necessary vaccination and follow up with your GP.

Support & Counselling

The Merrion Fertility Clinic team aim to support you through your treatment time with us. The unit also offers a confidential counselling service that can be accessed before, during and after treatment. The service can help and provide support to individuals and couples in managing stress & exploring personal issues with regards to their fertility.

Websites & Support groups that may be helpful:

Merrion Fertility Clinic – www.merrionfertility.ie

Fertility Ireland – www.fertility.ie

National Infertility Support & Information Group (N.I.S.I.G)- nisig@eircom.net

The Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority - www.hfea.gov.uk

The Endometriosis Society of Ireland – www.endo.ie

PCOS Ireland – www.pcos.ie