

Lifestyle can boost the odds of making babies

By Gail Johnson

Publish Date: May 12, 2011

Heather Schofield is expecting her first baby in August. The Vancouver homeopath couldn't be more thrilled: she spent six years trying to get pregnant. She says what helped her conceive was getting healthier than she's ever been—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

“Not being able to get pregnant reflected something bigger going on; to me it was a greater indication that something was out of balance,” Schofield says in a phone interview.

Having always embraced complementary medicine, she's used everything from osteopathy to chiropractic care in the past. She added to her arsenal traditional Chinese medicine as well as fertility treatments, including surgery for a blocked fallopian tube, in her attempt to get pregnant. For Schofield, an integrative approach—which included in-vitro fertilization and acupuncture—as well as a holistic one, paying equal attention to her body, mind, and soul, made her dream of getting pregnant come true.

“I believe that getting as healthy as possible is what gave me the step up,” Schofield says. “Even if I had just done the fertility treatments, they wouldn't necessarily have been successful.

“I'm over six months pregnant, and I've been feeling fabulous the whole time,” she adds. “I attest all this to an integrative approach and to bringing my body back into good balance. It's not just about being healthy to get pregnant but about staying healthy.”

There's evidence to back up the benefits of a healthy lifestyle on fertility.

Women who adopted a combination of five or more positive lifestyle factors—including eating a diet high in fibre and low in trans fat, taking multivitamins, and getting regular exercise—were 80 percent less likely to experience infertility due to ovulatory disorders compared to women who engaged in none of those factors, according to a study published recently in the journal *Obstetrics and Gynecology*.

Furthermore, a lifestyle that avoids obesity, cigarette smoking, and alcohol consumption has been identified as crucial by the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology in influencing the outcome of natural and assisted conception, according to a statement that was published recently in the journal *Human Reproduction*.

“We know there are better outcomes when people adopt a healthy lifestyle,” says Christina Williams, in-vitro fertilization (IVF) medical director of BC Women's Centre for Reproductive Health and clinical associate professor in UBC's reproductive endocrinology and infertility division, in a phone interview. “Eliminating environmental exposure to different noxious substances, like smoking, is

critical.”

Tobacco smoke brings on ovarian aging, Williams explains, and smoking cuts the success rate of IVF. “Smoking is a big no-no.”

Alcohol is also out: “We recommend women don’t drink,” Williams says.

Practising safe sex is vital, because pelvic inflammatory disease caused by sexually transmitted illnesses like chlamydia and gonorrhea is a risk factor for infertility.

Maintaining a healthy weight has a beneficial effect.

“Weight gain affects the hormones involved in ovulation...and can impair ovulation,” Williams says. Obesity has long been a known risk factor for ovulation problems, and more recent research has shown that it also contributes to infertility in women who ovulate normally.

A 2007 Human Reproduction study found that women with a body-mass index (BMI) of 30 or higher (which is considered obese) had significantly lower chances of becoming pregnant naturally compared with women who had BMIs between 21 and 29.

Regular exercise not only helps keep weight off but also helps diffuse the effects of stress, a common complaint of couples struggling to conceive.

A balanced diet is essential, Williams adds, and should include an abundance of whole grains, fruit, and vegetables, along with a folic-acid supplement to help prevent neural-tube defects.

Lorne Brown, a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine and medical director of the Acubalance Wellness Centre, has developed a fertility diet, which is mostly plant-based and includes whole foods, slow carbs, healthy fats, and antioxidants.

Acubalance has teamed up with Genesis Fertility Centre to provide an integrated approach to fertility treatments. Acubalance provides acupuncture to IVF patients at Genesis, including treatment on the day of embryo transfer. According to the Acubalance [website](#), acupuncture can increase blood flow to the uterus and ovaries, facilitating conception; minimize symptoms associated with assisted-reproductive therapies; and reduce stress.

As part of Canadian Infertility Awareness Week (May 15 to 22), Brown will be speaking at a free seminar along with Jason Hitkari, a reproductive endocrinologist at Genesis Fertility Centre, and Sue Dumais, a yoga for fertility practitioner and founder of Family Passages, about an [integrative approach to fertility](#) on Tuesday (May 17) at 7 p.m. at the [Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver](#) (950 West 41st Avenue).

According to Health Canada, seven percent of couples in their reproductive years are affected by infertility. It’s not just a female issue; rather, male factors are estimated to be the cause in as many as 50 percent of cases, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center. Risk factors for male infertility include a history of genital infection, testicular trauma, and early or delayed puberty. Lifestyle habits contribute too, such as exposure to occupational toxic substances like lead, cadmium,

mercury, ethylene oxide, and radioactivity; cigarette or marijuana smoking; and heavy alcohol consumption.

Although exercise is generally considered a good thing, men who cycle at least five hours a week had fewer and less active sperm than those who don't, according to a study published last year in *Fertility and Sterility*.

That same journal published a study earlier this year that found that men who use their laptops on their laps instead of on a desk could be impairing their fertility. It's theorized that overheating the scrotum can damage sperm.

Springs Eternal Natural Health Clinic naturopathic doctor Nari Pidutti says there are other strategies men and women hoping to become parents should be aware of, such as eliminating processed food, being assessed for candida overgrowth and toxic heavy metals, checking for hormonal imbalances and nutrient deficiencies, and undergoing detoxification.

"By taking control of our own health we discover the fulfillment of healing from within," Pidutti tells the *Straight*. "When this goal becomes aligned with your goal of overcoming infertility, you greatly increase your chances of growing your family."

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