



Sperm Health and Having A Family

Why do dads-to-be need to be in the best possible health before trying for a baby?

If you are planning to become a dad, it is just as important for you to consider your health before you start trying for a baby as it is for your partner. Many factors affect a man's sperm and the chance of his partner falling pregnant, including being overweight, smoking, older age, and exposure to harmful chemicals. Not only do these factors reduce the chance of a pregnancy happening, they can also affect the health of your baby.

How does being overweight affect fertility?

Being overweight reduces a man's fertility because it lowers sperm quality, including sperm count and motility (movement), and increases the number of abnormal sperm (see diagram Features of normal and poor sperm quality). Being overweight also reduces testosterone (male sex hormone) production and can cause sexual problems, such as difficulties getting an erection.

Being overweight can also affect the health of the baby. Sperm contain the genes which are passed from father to child. Being overweight can change how the genes function when passed onto the child and this can affect the health of the baby at birth and later in life. When factors, such as obesity, change how certain genes function, this is called epigenetics.

Both parents being a healthy weight improves the chance of pregnancy. The added bonus of being in the healthy weight range is that it improves your own health and reduces the risk of diabetes and heart disease. The best way to control weight is through a balanced and nutritious diet and regular physical activity.

FIVE KEY ACTIONS FOR HEALTHY SPERM

1. Aim for a healthy weight	Eat well and be active
2. Quit the smokes	Ask your GP for help
3. Cut-back on the beers	Drink in moderation
4. Avoid nasty chemicals	Limit exposure
5. Don't leave it too late	Age affects sperm too!

How does smoking affect fertility?

Cigarette smoking reduces sperm quality. Studies show that smokers have a lower sperm count and reduced semen volume, and poorer sperm motility compared to non-smokers. The more cigarettes smoked, the worse sperm quality is; however even 'light' smokers (less than 10 cigarettes a day) have reduced sperm quality. Heavy smoking (more than 20 cigarettes per day) at the time of conception increases the child's risk of the developing childhood leukaemia.

If you want to quit smoking, visit your GP for support. It takes around 3 months for new sperm to fully develop, so quitting smoking at least three months before trying for a baby is really important.

How does drinking alcohol affect fertility?

Having the occasional alcoholic drink is unlikely to affect your fertility. But heavy drinking can reduce sperm quality, lower testosterone production, make it harder to achieve an erection, and lead to liver damage which affects both general and reproductive health.

It is not possible to know exactly how much alcohol will impact your fertility so consuming alcohol in

moderation is your safest bet. Reducing or cutting out alcohol at least three months before trying for a baby is recommended.

How does age affect fertility?

Unlike women who are born with all the eggs they will ever have, men make sperm throughout their lives. While older men can father children, sperm quality declines with age.

Partners of men aged 45 years or older take longer to fall pregnant and have a higher risk of miscarriage. And, although they are rare, autism and other mental health problems are slightly more common in children with older fathers. The risk of the child having a genetic or chromosomal problem is also increased for older men.

While age cannot be controlled, if you want to become a father, sooner is better than later.

How can sexually transmitted infections affect fertility?

If you think you may have a sexually transmitted infection (STI), it is important to get it checked and treated by a doctor right away. STIs such as chlamydia or gonorrhoea can damage the reproductive organs and cause infertility. Most STIs are easy to treat, and damage can be avoided if the infection is dealt with early. Treatment also reduces the chance of spreading the STI to your partner.

How does the use of certain drugs or medications affect fertility?

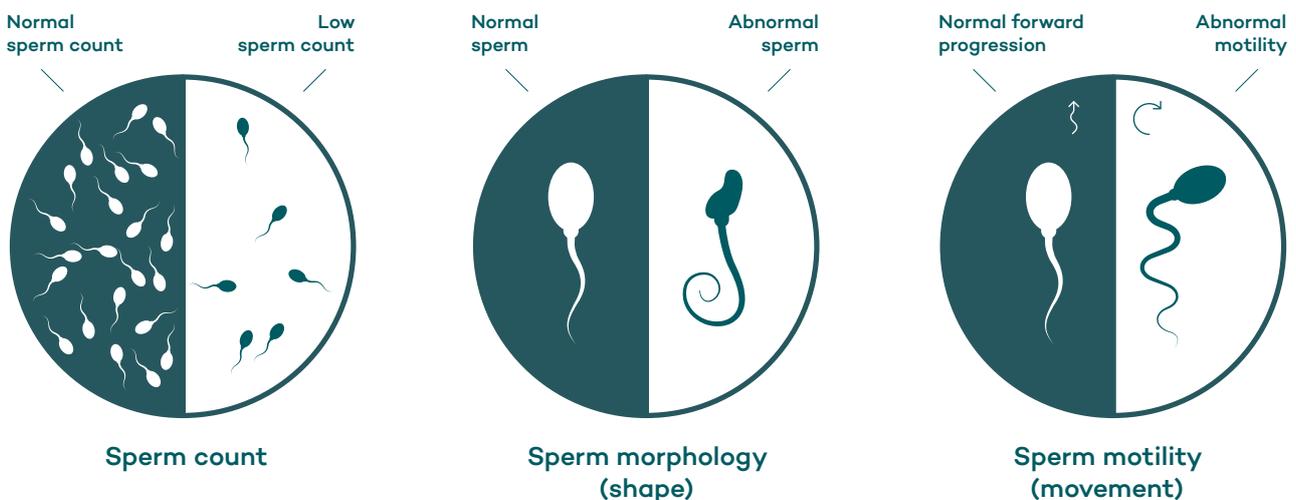
The use of anabolic steroids (drugs that mimic testosterone) lower male fertility, with long-term and sometimes irreversible effects on sperm count and quality. Side effects of anabolic steroids include: testicular shrinkage, problems getting an erection and low libido (sex drive). Anabolic steroids stop the body from making testosterone and other hormones which are needed for sperm production and reproductive functioning. This results in very few or no sperm being made in the testis. Anabolic steroids therefore act as a strong contraceptive in men and should not be taken if you are planning to have a baby with your partner.

Some prescribed medications and recreational drugs can also lower fertility and/or sexual function in a man. This includes:

- Long-term use of pain killers which contain opiates
- Medications for treating depression and anxiety
- Chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatments for cancer
- Recreational drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin.

Talk to your doctor if you are concerned that the medication you are taking might affect your fertility.

Features of normal and poor sperm quality



How can environmental and occupational chemicals affect fertility?

If you are exposed to chemicals in your workplace it is important to wear protective clothing and follow occupational health and safety guidelines. When you are trying for a baby, avoid exposure to harmful chemicals, including pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals and household chemicals. Many everyday plastics contain a particular group of chemicals called endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs), which can decrease the chances of pregnancy.

Visit healthymale.org.au or speak to your doctor for more info.



HEALTHY MALE
ANDROLOGY AUSTRALIA



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