

SELF

Can Stress Actually Make It Harder To Get Pregnant?

WELLNESS
By Amy Marturana | June 5, 2016



Couples struggling to conceive hear it all the time: Stressing about getting pregnant will just make it harder. Except being told that typically just causes even more stress, throwing those who are already under serious pressure into a bigger spiral of anxiety. But does being frazzled really make it harder to make a baby?

The relationship between stress and infertility is a complicated one. Some research has suggested that yes, stress can hinder conception, while other studies have found that reducing stress doesn't magically help a couple conceive. Everyone agrees on one thing, though: Going through infertility is incredibly stressful. And staying sane and healthy throughout the process is important for every facet of the woman's well-being.

"Wellness is important for every aspect of our lives, and reproductive health is definitely included in that," Alan B. Copperman, M.D., director of the division of reproductive endocrinology and infertility at Mount Sinai Hospital and medical director of Reproductive Medicine Associates of New York, tells SELF. "We should take the mind-body connection seriously, but we should not turn that into blame and shame on a woman trying to get pregnant." Here's why:

Research on the connection between stress and infertility is conflicting.

A 2014 study of 401 women published in the journal *Human Reproduction* found that those with the highest levels of one stress-related enzyme were two times more likely to be infertile (cortisol had no impact, though). This is the most recent evidence that suggests stress is a player in infertility. Some studies have also shown that stress-related interventions may improve pregnancy rates, but others have had mixed results, showing reducing stress may actually have little or no impact on fertility outcomes.

According to the American Psychological Association and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, the interaction between factors is complex, and the jury is still out on whether staying stress-free can have any impact on a woman's ability to become pregnant. The APA does conclude that considering all of the research on the topic, biological factors are way more important than psychological ones when determining a woman's chance of conceiving.

There *is* evidence that acute stress can impact ovulation. But it's not likely that everyday stressors will stop you from conceiving.

We know that physical stress can definitely impact fertility. Intense exercise, malnutrition, and a severely low or high BMI can interfere with ovulation, Copperman says. "So we do see environmental or outside influences that modify a woman's chance of getting pregnant every single month," he says. But there's no proof that day-to-day stress does that, he says.

Copperman notes that extreme situations or times of acute, life-threatening stress are certainly different. "At times of starvation or chronic medical illnesses the brain doesn't want to waste energy on ovulation, menstruation, and procreation," he says. It has more important things to do, like defend the body against disease or keep the lungs pumping and heart beating. From an evolutionary standpoint, it makes sense that being under an intense amount of stress could impact our ability to procreate, [Wendy Chang, M.D.](#), a reproductive endocrinology specialist at Southern California Reproductive Center, tells SELF. Thousands of years ago, environmental stress, like total lack of food or needing to migrate to a new, safer place to live, told the body it wasn't a good time to get pregnant. "The human body has evolved to know that when you're under a lot of stress, it's not a good time to have a baby that will compete with your resources."

But "there's just no evidence that day-to-day anxiety, what we're feeling and thinking, is going to change if you make a normal egg or if it fertilizes and implants," Copperman says.

Managing stress while going through infertility treatments is important, though, for the hopeful mother-to-be's well-being.

While “we don’t have numbers that show it will affect ovulation,” daily stress certainly has an impact on a woman’s quality of life, Chang says. One thing experts do know for sure is that infertility is stressful. Anyone who’s ever been stressed (all of us) knows that it can make you more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors—overeating, undereating, smoking—which can ultimately impact fertility if your overall physical health declines as a result.

It’s impossible to live life with zero stress, though. “I think it’s just naïve and unrealistic to tell a woman we want her to have no stress,” Chang says. The key is learning how to cope and stay healthy throughout it all. Getting enough sleep each night, regular physical activity (but don’t overdo it; over exercising can make it harder to conceive), eating a healthy balanced diet, and practicing mindful meditation are all easy ways to keep stress levels under control. Chang also recommends acupuncture to bring stress levels down.

Doing what you can to manage stress better is good for your overall physical and emotional health. You’ve got enough on your mind when you’re trying to conceive without getting stressed out over the fact that you’re stressed out. It’s important to take care of yourself (and your hopefully-soon-to-be-developing baby), says Copperman. “Women should cut themselves a little slack.”

<http://www.self.com/wellness/2016/06/can-stress-actually-make-it-harder-to-get-pregnant/>