

Patient advice sheet

Body weight and fertility

Does my weight affect my fertility and chances of having a baby?

If your weight is too high or too low, this can affect your chance of getting pregnant, which is why being a healthy weight is important.

Being overweight or underweight can also reduce the efficacy of fertility treatments and can increase your risk of pregnancy complications.

This information will help you have the best chance of getting pregnant and having a healthy baby. Your healthcare professionals will not judge you for being overweight or underweight and will support you in optimising your weight.

What is BMI?

Your body mass index (BMI) is used to calculate whether your weight is healthy. It's calculated by dividing your weight in kg by height in meters squared.

A healthy BMI is 19 to 25. For example, a BMI of 20 means 20kg/m².

If your BMI is less than 19, it can be harder for you to get pregnant.

If you have a BMI of 30 or more (classified as obese), it can take longer to get pregnant and there's a higher risk of pregnancy complications in both mum and baby.

The best way of protecting your health and your baby's health is to lose weight before getting pregnant.

How does weight affect my fertility?

For pregnancy to happen, the ovaries must release an egg for a sperm to fertilise.

Some women who are underweight or obese will have problems getting pregnant. This is due to the ovaries not releasing an egg (ovulation issues).

Body mass index in the obese range can lead to irregular periods (menstrual cycles) and lack of ovulation. Even obese women with regular periods have lower pregnancy rates compared to women with a healthy BMI.

A visit to a healthcare professional before becoming pregnant can help identify other health problems related to obesity that can impact pregnancy such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), thyroid disease and diabetes.

What if I'm underweight?

A BMI of less than 19 (underweight) often causes irregular menstrual cycles and may cause ovulation to stop altogether. This is especially true if you're losing weight because you're not eating enough or you're exercising too much.

Women with a low BMI should work with their doctor and other healthcare professionals to understand the cause of their low BMI and find ways of optimising it.

Does obesity affect my chances of getting pregnant with treatment?

There's good evidence that obesity lowers the chance of success with in vitro fertilization (IVF). There are many reasons for this.

Being overweight can have a negative effect on the way your body responds to the fertility drugs. A smaller number of eggs can be produced, compared to women with a healthy BMI.

Obesity can also make procedures that are part of the fertility treatment, such as the egg collection, more challenging and less efficient, with fewer eggs of lower quality being collected.

It can also reduce the chance of the embryo (the fertilized egg) being implanted in the womb and increase the chance of an early pregnancy loss.

Does being overweight increase my chances of having a miscarriage?

Yes. Higher miscarriage rates are seen following natural conception, ovulation induction and assisted conception.

The overall risk for all women of a miscarriage under 12 weeks is 1 in 5 (20%). If you have a BMI over 30, your risk increases to 1 in 4 (25%).

If you're underweight (BMI less than 19) it can also increase your chance of having a miscarriage.

Could reaching a healthy weight help me get pregnant?

Yes. If you have a BMI of 30 or above, whether you're planning your first pregnancy or are between pregnancies, we advise you to lose weight.

If you lose weight, you can:

- increase your chance of getting pregnant
- reduce the additional risks to you and your baby during pregnancy
- reduce your risk of developing diabetes in future pregnancies and in later life.

You must have a BMI between 19 and less than 30 to qualify for NHS funded IVF treatment.

If you're overweight, your healthcare professional should offer you a structured weight loss programme or you can contact Live Well Stay Well (see useful contacts below) for guidance.

Aim to lose weight gradually (up to 1kg or 2lbs a week) as crash dieting isn't good for your health. Even a small loss in weight can have significant benefits to your health and fertility.

You may be offered a referral to a dietician or an appropriately trained health professional. If you're not yet ready to lose weight, you should have contact details for support for when you are.

If you have a BMI of 30 or more, you should take 5mg of folic acid daily for at least a month before you conceive (ideally taken for 3 months before becoming pregnant). Continue taking this until you reach your 13th week of pregnancy.

If you're underweight (BMI less than 19) we'll advise you to gain weight gradually and make recommendations on how to do it safely.

Further information

'Why your weight matters during pregnancy and after birth', information leaflet provided by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (RCOG)

Food Fact Sheets on other topics including weight loss, glycemic index, pregnancy, healthy eating and food and mood are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts.

Be Healthy Bucks bhb.maximusuk.co.uk/

01296 322738

Contact us

Fertility secretary – 01494 324563

Please remember that this leaflet is intended as general information only. We aim to make the information as up to date and accurate as possible, but please note that it is subject to change. Please therefore always check specific advice on any concerns you may have with your doctor.

How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection prevention & control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection prevention & control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. Please follow our infection prevention and control guidelines when visiting our healthcare sites. Further information is available on our website.

Patient Advice Sheet

If you would like a copy of this information on audiotape, in large print or translated, please call the Patient Advice Liaison Service on 01296 831120 or email bht.pals@nhs.net

