

# Who's the daddy?

New research suggests that men also have a body clock, but you can boost your fertility levels naturally

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Fertility declines at 30 – it's a familiar headline but rather than another article berating women for concentrating on their careers, this time it's men who are under fire. A recent study by Parisian fertility experts found that a man's fertility declines from his mid-30s. So while it's not impossible to father children in your 70s (think Des O'Connor), not so for the majority of us. Fortunately, there are a number of things you can do to boost your baby-making abilities. A study by the University of Surrey found couples having trouble conceiving, who changed their lifestyle, diet and took nutritional supplements, had an 80 per cent success rate – cigars all round!

## Tick tock, body clock

The French study adds to a growing body of evidence that men's fertility does decline with age. This wouldn't be a problem if we were having families in our 20s, but figures from the Office of National Statistics show the average age of married fathers rose from 29 in 1971 to 34 in 2003. However, Dr Allan Pacey, a male fertility expert at Sheffield University, believes we shouldn't panic. He says, 'Yes, fertility levels do

## TIPS 5 ways to boost your fertility

- **Avoid heat** No jacuzzis, tight pants, or working in high temperatures.
- **Lose weight** It will lower your oestrogen levels and cool down your nether regions.
- **Eat more shellfish and red meat** Both are rich sources of zinc.
- **Give up smoking** Experts agree this is the single most important factor that can improve your fertility.
- **Have sex!** 'You don't need to "save up" sperm,' says Zita West. 'Three times a week (not just the fertile period) is ideal.'



One in seven couples in Britain have trouble conceiving. The causes are roughly one-third female problems, one-third male and one-third joint.

decline with age, and we are seeing more men in fertility clinics – but we are seeing a lot more people overall.' Dr Pacey says there a number of other factors that can have a far more significant impact on male fertility than age.

The first set of factors is what happened to you in the womb, when your testicles developed. There could be issues such as an undescended, or twisted, testicle (usually corrected with an operation in childhood) or the effect of chemicals that a mother absorbs during pregnancy. 'These are phthalates, which are found in make-up and some plastics,' explains Dr Pacey. The European Union has already banned two phthalates from being used in plastic toys because of the risk to developing male reproductive organs.

The second set of factors is what you do in your adult life. Just as exposure to chemicals when you're in the womb can affect your fertility, exposure as an adult can also damage sperm. 'There is some evidence to show that exposure to solvents makes testicles work less well,' warns Dr Pacey. 'Men working as builders, printers or painters could be at risk.' Other jobs that can reduce male fertility include welding and steel work (high temperatures can lower sperm count) and working with lead, because high lead levels can affect sperm function.

Interestingly, it seems that cabbies might also be affected; a study of Italian taxi drivers in 2001 found they had much lower sperm counts than normal. 'There is a worry over men who sit down for more than two hours a day in the "closed leg" position,' says Dr Pacey. 'It heats up the scrotum and can affect sperm production.' Office workers should be fine because they move around a lot more. Jacuzzi lovers should also beware – Australian researchers say tight trunks and hot water could lower sperm counts.

## The daddy diet

Not surprisingly, improving your diet can help. But you should also stop smoking. Research collected by anti-smoking campaigners Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), reveals that men who smoke have a lower sperm count, plus more of the sperm they produce have damaged DNA. Smoking can also trigger impotence by restricting blood flow.

'You should stop smoking three to four months before starting to try for a family,' advises natural fertility expert Zita West, who runs a clinic in London ([www.zitawest.com](http://www.zitawest.com)). 'This is roughly how long it takes sperm to grow and mature.'

You should also think about cutting out, or at least cutting down, the amount of alcohol you drink. A study by Argentinian researchers in 2003 found men who drank at least two large glasses of wine a day had lower sperm counts and less mobile sperm



Baby food: for super sperm, eat Brazils for their selenium and oysters for zinc

than non-drinkers. Losing weight is also a good idea. 'You are three times more likely to have a low sperm count if you suffer from obesity,' warns Dr Pacey. 'Not only does it make things warmer around your testicles, excess fat triggers hormone changes so you produce more oestrogen.'

The most important mineral you can take is zinc. Studies have found men with low sperm counts also have a zinc deficiency. Rich sources of zinc include oysters, red meat and eggs, or you can

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try taking a supplement. 'Zinc is even more effective combined with folic acid,' says Dr Pacey. Folic acid is normally taken by women to prevent birth defects, but a recent University of California study found it could also boost sperm counts. Try taking a supplement or eating plenty of green leafy vegetables such as spinach.

Antioxidants are vital in the fight to become a father. 'We all age, and what causes ageing is free-radical damage,' explains West. 'Sperm is also susceptible, so you need to fight free radicals to improve sperm counts.' Free radicals are a by-product of processes like breathing, but their production in the body is increased with exposure to harmful chemicals such as cigarette smoke and pollution. Antioxidants can help prevent free-radical damage. Try to include plenty of vitamin C and vitamin E in your diet, both of which are powerful antioxidants,' says West. You can find vitamin E in nuts, olive oil and sunflower seeds, while vitamin C is in citrus fruits, red peppers and broccoli.

Essential fatty acids (EFAs), such as omega-3s, can also improve the quality of your sperm. Good food sources of EFAs are oily fish such as mackerel and salmon, or flaxseed oil. Finally, try adding selenium – found in Brazil nuts – to your daily diet. It works as an antioxidant with vitamin E and can also improve the quality of sperm.

## Don't let stress take over

The stress of trying to conceive can be too much for some couples and can affect fertility. A study by Dr Jacky Boivin, a health psychologist from Cardiff University, found couples who suffered from more stress in their relationship needed an extra cycle of IVF treatment before they became pregnant. 'This could be because they were not eating properly because they were too stressed, or smoking more to cope,' she says. Even for couples not going through IVF, stress can affect their chances of becoming pregnant.

'You need to keep the intimacy in a relationship without the pressure of pregnancy,' says Dana Braithwaite, a sex and relationship counsellor from The Natural Fertility Clinic in Cheshire ([www.naturalfertilityclinic.co.uk](http://www.naturalfertilityclinic.co.uk)). 'Men can feel angry and guilty, which doesn't create the best atmosphere for sex. But I always tell them not to lose hope; just because their partner isn't pregnant now doesn't mean they will never father a child. Where there's a willy, there's a way!'

● **For more help and information, try:** Human Fertilisation and Embrology Authority, [www.hfea.gov.uk](http://www.hfea.gov.uk); British Infertility Counselling Association, [www.bica.net](http://www.bica.net); Infertility Network UK, [www.infertilitynetworkuk.com](http://www.infertilitynetworkuk.com); Fertility Friends, [www.fertilityfriends.co.uk](http://www.fertilityfriends.co.uk)