

Tilling THE Soil

SUPPORTING PRECONCEPTION HEALTHCARE WITH NUTRITION

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Did you know:

- 1 Your health *before* getting pregnant impacts your ease of conception, pregnancy, delivery, and the health of your future baby?
- 2 Significant healthy fetal development occurs in the first 2-8 weeks of pregnancy? Some of this time typically occurs *before* a woman knows she is pregnant.
- 3 In Canada *1 in 6* couples experience fertility concerns? It is taking longer than expected to conceive, and there is an increased reliance on medication and technology.

This may be surprising to some, but it is very much a reality. These facts highlight the need for preconception health care (PCHC).

Women have all their eggs by the time they are born. However, four months prior to conception, the egg released in that cycle is being recruited and matures. In this same time frame a man's sperm is regenerated. This four month period is therefore a crucial window to support prenatal health and improve the chance of having a strong and healthy baby.

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Factors affecting fertility

Preconception health care is multifaceted. First and foremost, hormonal imbalances are assessed and addressed. Then comes identification and treatment of nutrient deficiencies, infections, chronic health concerns, excess stress, and more. PCHC programs are individualized and are recommended for both men and women. They include a combination of nutritional advice, detoxification, stress management, lifestyle coaching, the prescription of natural remedies, traditional Chinese medicine (including acupuncture), and menstrual cycle tracking.

Meet one of the main players

These days, both subtle and overt hormonal imbalances are widespread. One of the most common patterns I see in practice is called estrogen dominance. This refers to an estrogen level that is too high in relation to progesterone. Symptoms include:

- » Irregular menstrual periods
- » Bloating
- » Breast tenderness
- » PMS
- » Headaches
- » Mood swings
- » Fatigue
- » Insomnia
- » Issues with conception

In this case, estrogen is either truly in excess, or a relative excess due to a progesterone deficiency. Estrogen is normally conjugated and broken down by the liver. It is fat-soluble and therefore excreted through the stool. The estrogen dominant pattern has complex causes including chemical exposure, ineffective detoxification and elimination, and imbalances of other hormones like cortisol, thyroid, or insulin. Estrogen dominance can negatively impact fertility making it a natural focus during preconception care.

Preconception preparation

So what can you do? First, work on limiting exposure to plastics, conventional household cleaners, cosmetics, pesticides, dry cleaned fabrics, mercury, and other harmful chemicals. Then, open the channels of elimination and detoxification by supporting the liver, kidneys, skin and colon. This will lower your toxic burden and decrease excess estrogen.

Your daily diet is perhaps the most powerful way to treat hormonal imbalance and prepare the body for pregnancy. Here are some important nutritional considerations during your preconception health period:

- » **Fresh produce:** Learn the dirty dozen, known to have high levels of pesticides. Either choose organic varieties, or omit them altogether.
- » **Animal products** (i.e. meat, fish, eggs, or dairy): The safest choices are wild, organic, local, free-range, or grass-fed. The key is to avoid animal products containing synthetic hormones and chemicals acting as xenoestrogens.
- » **Include protein and healthy fats in every meal:** This keeps blood sugar stable and provides starting materials for hormones that may be deficient.
- » **Choose whole grains versus refined:** This also keeps blood sugar stable and increases fiber. More fiber keeps bowel movements

regular allowing for proper elimination of toxins and unwanted excess hormones.

- » **When in doubt:** increase greens, and brightly coloured fruit and veggies on every plate. These foods help the liver detoxify, and provide antioxidants. This is vital because detoxification actually increases the release of potentially harmful oxidative compounds that must be then neutralized by antioxidants.
- » **Skip the sweets:** They spike blood sugar and have a widespread impact on insulin, stress hormones, and reproductive hormones leading to further imbalances.

There are of course many *specific* healthy foods to incorporate in a detoxifying, hormone balancing diet that you can explore in Dr. Heidi's recipes on the following pages.

In the four months leading up to your ideal conception date, all parents are encouraged to clean up the diet and optimize overall health to build the healthiest foundation for themselves and their future babies. Take that first step today!

Why detoxification?

In this day and age, even with extreme caution, we are exposed to a wide array of toxins. They are found in the food we eat, the water we drink, the medications we may take, and the air we breathe. These toxins can accumulate in the body and lead to multiple issues. Some, known as xenoestrogens, mimic reproductive hormones and cause imbalances. Toxins can also be passed on to a growing baby during pregnancy and breastfeeding, making it important to decrease the toxic load in advance.

Nutritional Highlight on Cruciferous Vegetables

This is a group of vegetables including arugula, bok choy, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collard greens, kale, and more. They are very nutrient dense, high in vitamin A carotenoids, vitamin C, folic acid, and fiber. They also contain protein and omega 3 fats. Cruciferous veggies are also well known to contain a unique group of sulfur containing phytonutrients called glucosinolates. Glucosinolates stimulate liver detoxification and the production of antioxidants. One of the breakdown products of these is called Indole 3 Carbinol (I3C), which helps with estrogen metabolism in the body.

Cruciferous veggies are considered anticancer, antioxidant, and supportive to detoxification. They are an extremely healthy group of veggies. See Dr. Heidi Lescanec's recipes for new and creative ways to fill your diet with these nutritional powerhouses.