

Increasing fertility threefold

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According to the American Pregnancy Association, six million women a year deal with infertility. Now, a Tel Aviv University study is giving new hope to women who want to conceive — in the form of a pill they can find on their drugstore shelves right now.

Prof. Adrian Shulman of Tel Aviv University's Sackler Faculty of Medicine and the Meir Medical Center has found a statistical connection between the over-the-counter vitamin supplement DHEA, used to counter the effects of aging, and successful pregnancy rates in [women](#) undergoing treatment for infertility.

In the first controlled study on the effects of the supplement, Prof. Shulman found that women being treated for infertility who also received supplements of DHEA were three times more likely to conceive than women being treated without the additional drug. The results were recently published in *AYALA*, the journal of the Israeli Fertility Association.

A natural supplement to fertility treatments

After hearing anecdotal evidence from his patients and the medical community on the benefits of combining fertility treatments with DHEA, a supplement marketed as an anti-aging drug around the world, Prof. Shulman decided to put this old wives' tale to the statistical test.

He and his fellow researchers conducted a study in which a control group of women received treatment for poor ovulation, and another group

received the same treatment with the addition of the DHEA supplement. The latter group took 75mg of the supplement daily for 40 days before starting fertility treatments, and continued for up to five months.

Not only were women who combined [infertility](#) treatment with DHEA more likely to conceive, the researchers discovered, they were also more likely to experience a healthy [pregnancy](#) and delivery.

"In the DHEA group, there was a 23% live birth rate as opposed to a 4% rate in the control group," explains Shulman. "More than that, of the pregnancies in the DHEA group, all but one ended in healthy deliveries."

Making grade-A eggs?

Shulman believes that women who are finding little success with their current fertility treatments could look to DHEA to improve their chances of conceiving. "We recommend that women try this DHEA treatment, in conjunction with fertility treatments, for four to five months," says Prof. Shulman. It could also be used as a regular "vitamin" for women who have already conceived and are pregnant, but more research would need to be done on the compound to determine its effects, says Prof. Shulman.

DHEA, for 5-Dehydroepiandrosterone (5-DHEA), is a naturally-occurring steroid found in the brain, which plays an important biological role in humans and other mammals. Produced in the adrenal glands, it is also synthesized in the brain. The pharmaceutical version of this molecule is known as Prastera, Prasterone, Fidelin and Fluasterone, and identical generics are widely available over the counter in the United States without a prescription. Women interested in using DHEA to conceive, however, should consult their practitioner first, suggests Prof. Shulman, a gynecologist and director of the IVF Unit of the Obstetric and Gynecology Department at Meir Medical Center.

While studies on the effects of DHEA are far from complete -- his test group only included around 20 women -- Prof. Shulman hopes that further research will unlock the secrets of why the supplement aids in successful conception in women with an otherwise poor response to fertility treatments. "We need to look into what the drug actually does to make the body more fertile," he says. "It could be affecting components such as the quality of the eggs or the follicles."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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