

The myths and modern aids for determining ovulation

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Like many of today's moms, Faith Kirkpatrick waited until she was in her 30s before she tried to get pregnant. Then she knew her biological clock was ticking.

"I'm a planner," said Kirkpatrick, 34, of New Rochelle, N.Y. "So once my husband and I made the decision, I wanted to get pregnant quickly."

With the help of an ovulation test called Knowhen Saliva Fertility Monitor, Kirkpatrick was pregnant in two months. "Month 1, we tried, but it didn't work," she said. "Month 2, we tried harder!" Kirkpatrick's daughter, Logan, was born in November.

The word "ovulation" dates to the 1700s, but it was misunderstood for most of human history. Doctors knew the definition: An egg (ovum) travels from an ovary, down a fallopian tube, in search of sperm. If a sperm scores a touchdown, it may grow into a fetus. If not, the uterine lining sheds and the woman menstruates.

The timing of the egg's journey, though, was a mystery. So incorrect fertility advice came from everyone from Plato (have sex once a week, he advised) to Aristotle (have sex anytime during the month but separate slowly afterward, and refrain from sneezing).

Finally, in 1946, American physician George Papanicolaou (the Pap smear inventor) wrote that ovulation occurs two weeks after a woman's period and can be identified by a fern-like pattern in the vaginal mucus.

His research subjects were his laboratory guinea pigs and his wife, Mary.

The "Day 14" advice still rules, even though timing varies from one woman to the next. "You may have regular periods but not ovulate," said Dr. Jane Frederick, medical director of Newport Beach, Calif.-based HRC Fertility (orangecountyfertilitydr.com). "Or you may have no periods, then ovulate."

Sperm don't follow rules either. "They're sneaky," Frederick said. "They can lie in wait for an egg for 48 to 72 hours."

A woman who is trying to get pregnant is against the clock because her egg supply decreases monthly.

"You have the highest number of eggs - about 6 million - in your fifth month in utero," Frederick said. "By puberty, it's 200,000. Your best eggs are those released in your 20s. After that, they're fewer and feebler."

Initial tests for Frederick's infertility patients include checking their egg reserves, looking for fallopian-tube blockages and analyzing their partners' sperm quality.

A woman can have some control in determining the best time to try. At home, she can monitor ovulation by catching a temperature spike with a basal-temperature thermometer or with urine- or saliva-based ovulation kits. The saliva type is reusable and indicates a longer window of opportunity. But, Frederick warned, it measures salt, which is higher among overweight women, ovulating or not.

Also, women use ovulation kits not only to determine when to get pregnant but also when they won't get pregnant, said Helen Denise, a Newark, N.J., civil engineer who developed Knowhen after suffering an

ectopic pregnancy.

"The pill makes me nauseous," Kirkpatrick said. "So the kit helps me use a more natural form of birth control while I'm trying to avoid pregnancy. Then, when I'm ready to have another baby, it will help me know which days to try."

True or false?

The science of ovulation is young, so it's no wonder myths persist. Are the following true or false?

You don't ovulate after being on the pill. False. In fact, Frederick said, the pill can help regulate your irregular cycle before you try to get pregnant.

Drinking cough syrup triggers ovulation. False, but if it contains alcohol, it may loosen inhibitions.

Tender breasts or abdominal cramping signal ovulation. It depends. Many women feel no signals.

Breast-feeding prevents ovulation. False. Witness all the siblings born nine months apart.

Being overweight or underweight affects [ovulation](#). True.

Swallowing semen increases fertility. False. "Your reproductive plumbing is at the other end!" Frederick said.

Adopting causes pregnancy. False. "You can adopt a child and get pregnant the same year, but one doesn't cause the other," Frederick said.

Too much sex can reduce fertility. True. For best results, give the sperm a chance to regenerate.

Getting a new partner can alter your cycle. True.

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