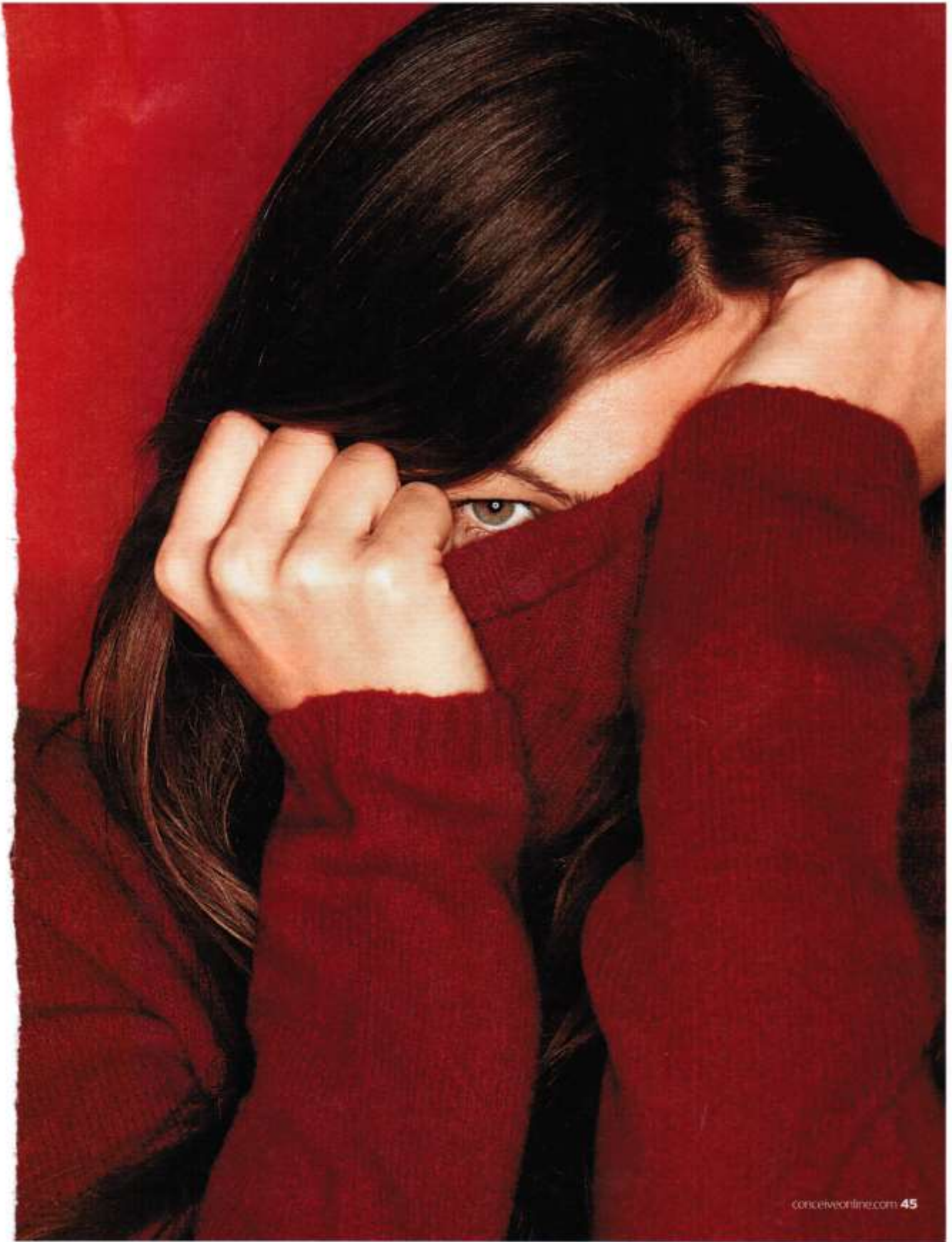


don't be shy

Some of your most important questions about making babies might also be the ones you're too embarrassed to ask. So we asked for you.

Confession time. There are a lot of things I want to know about fertility that I've never been able to bring myself to ask. There are probably all sorts of crazy and outrageous questions that have occurred to you too, which don't exactly spring to your lips when you're sitting in front of your doctor in a paper gown. Never fear though, because here are the answers to all the questions you've been dying to find out about, but haven't been able to ask. *By Brette Sember*



Is there a sex position that's best for conceiving?

Good news here: whatever floats your boat works just fine. Most experts agree that any position that deposits sperm next to the cervix is effective. Some women worry that if they are on top, sperm will leak out immediately. Semen is very thick when it is ejaculated and then liquefies with time. This keeps it next to the cervix long enough for the sperm to forge ahead. However, Victoria Jennings, Ph.D., director of Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health in Washington, D.C., points out that there is a common belief that missionary position is best. "There is not actual evidence for this, but it certainly can't hurt."

Is there any kind of body type that's best for conceiving? I'm flat-chested and thin-hipped. Are women with more curves more fertile?

"Fertile women come in all sizes," says Sandra L. Glahn, co-author of *The Infertility Companion* (Zondervan, 2004), who points out that women of all body types are able to get pregnant. However, Randy

Morris, M.D., associate clinical professor of reproductive endocrinology at the University of Illinois School of Medicine in Chicago, says a recent study has shown that women with larger breasts and slimmer waists have higher levels of estrogen and progesterone, the hormones associated with fertility, during their menstrual cycles. The study did not compare pregnancy rates though. Since you can't control your basic body shape, focus instead on staying healthy and timing sex during your fertile period.

I think my husband masturbates sometimes. Should he stop while we're trying to conceive?

When you're trying to conceive, frequent masturbation around your fertile period can temporarily reduce your partner's sperm count. But occasional masturbation is not a concern. Men have a 24/7 sperm factory at work; two days of ejaculation in a row have no effect on sperm count, but more than that could decrease it. If you're concerned, suggest that he abstain from masturbating during your fertile period when you'll be having regular sex together. But for the



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rest of the month it's not a problem. In fact, if you're not having sex very often when you're not "trying," your husband might even get a benefit (besides the obvious one) from masturbating. "Abstaining from ejaculation for too long is also detrimental to male fertility," explains Michael Bohrer, M.D., reproductive endocrinologist with Reproductive Medicine Associates of New Jersey in Morristown, and former director of the IVF (in vitro fertilization) program at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical Center in New Jersey.

My period isn't late yet, but I really feel like I'm pregnant. Am I crazy? Could I tell so soon? How early can you do a home pregnancy test?

Early pregnancy often feels like a period about to start, but some women do notice the effects of the early rise in hCG (human chorionic gonadotropin) levels, which can result in breast tenderness. Dr. Morris conducted an informal five-year survey at his fertility office and asked women about to take a pregnancy test if they believed they were pregnant. What he found: "Most pregnant patients did not think they were pregnant."

A pregnancy test is the best way to determine if you're pregnant, and a blood test is the most accurate type, particularly in early pregnancy. Home tests (which detect hormone levels in urine) are accurate when used according to package instructions, usually not until the first day of your missed period. Some brands now offer results up to five days sooner, but with decreased accuracy.

Does having an orgasm help you to get pregnant?

In theory, an orgasm could help you get pregnant, but experts agree it's definitely not necessary. When you have an orgasm, your uterus contracts, causing a vacuum effect. It makes sense that the vacuum effect could help move sperm up into the uterus. But as Sandra Glahn points out, "There is a certain logic in this theory, yet while studies have shown that such a vacuum effect exists, whether it actually brings about a higher pregnancy rate is unproven."

The key to getting pregnant is not whether or not you have an orgasm (although having one sure makes trying more fun!), but, instead, timing intercourse to correspond with your fertile period. Trying to force yourself to have an orgasm every time you have sex would just be a recipe for disaster, since the stress will definitely not put you in the mood.

On the other hand, it sort of goes without saying that it's pretty important for your partner to have an orgasm if you're trying to make a baby! Without it, no sperm will be able to fertilize an egg, whether you have an orgasm or not.

If I get my period regularly does that mean I'm ovulating and fertile?

If only it did. Fortunately, for the vast majority of women, regular periods equal ovulation. And not getting a period is definitely a sign that you may not be ovulating. But it is possible to get a period in months in which you do not ovulate.

"Even the fact that you're ovulating doesn't mean for sure that you're able to get pregnant," points out Georgetown's Jennings, who explains that you could have a tube blockage or low progesterone levels or other problems. If you're concerned, chart your basal body temperature and use an ovulation prediction kit to check whether your cycle is functioning normally.

Should I try to stop the sperm from leaking out after sex, and if so for how long?

After your partner ejaculates, the fluid that carries the sperm liquefies

and most of it runs out of your body. But your body can't use and doesn't need that fluid, so that's fine. You may be worried that you're losing valuable sperm, but, according to Dr. Bohrer, "The vagina naturally slopes backwards and the majority of ejaculate will be retained."

Sperm are speedy little guys and can actually make their way to the fallopian tubes within five to ten minutes of ejaculation. Many experts do recommend lying on your back with a pillow under your hips for about 15 to 20 minutes after intercourse. The consensus is that it can't hurt and may in fact help. But forget standing on your head—that won't do anything other than make you dizzy.

Is it okay to diet while trying to get pregnant? Is it safe to cut out carbs?

Some dieting is okay. "A well-balanced and healthy diet accompanied by light exercise is ideal," says Dr. Bohrer. But he adds, "Extreme diets like South Beach and Atkins induce a starvation-type response; not good if you're trying to conceive." Make sure you're getting enough calcium, folic acid, and iron by taking a prenatal vitamin.

Are there any sexual practices we should avoid while trying to conceive? For example, is saliva harmful? Sex toys? Flavored lubricants?

Lubricants can certainly help make intercourse more comfortable and pleasurable, but if you're trying to conceive, lay off the lubes for now. Mark Leondires, M.D., a reproductive endocrinologist with Reproductive Medicine Associates of Connecticut, in Norwalk, says, "Oil-based lubricants or any product containing scents or inorganic materials are likely to kill sperm." Lubricants can also affect sperm motility, slowing down the swimmers. A new product called Pre-Seed is marketed as a sperm-friendly lubricant for those trying to conceive.

Jay Schinfeld, M.D., a reproductive endocrinologist with Abington Reproductive Medicine in Abington, Pennsylvania, says, "The safest two lubricants are olive oil or egg whites. Take a medium to large egg, separate the white, and let it come to room temperature." Since raw eggs have been associated with salmonella, it's best to avoid oral sex when egg whites are being used.

And speaking of oral sex... saliva is not harmful to sperm. And sex toys are not a problem, as long as you wash them carefully and avoid any contamination from the rectum.

My periods are usually very regular, but the last one was late. Could that mean I was pregnant and miscarried?

It's possible. "Early pregnancy losses are extremely common, and not a cause for concern," reassures Peter McGovern, M.D., a reproductive endocrinologist at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. But you wouldn't be able to identify these late periods as miscarriages, since you wouldn't experience more cramping or have other symptoms. The only way you'd know that you were pregnant and miscarried would be to confirm it with a blood test. In fact, having a late period one or two times a year is perfectly normal and more often due to stress, travel, or illness than miscarriage.

Do we have to have sex every day while I'm trying to get pregnant?

"Couples who have sex every one to two days conceive more quickly than those who have sex every three to four days," says Dr. McGovern. The standard advice from fertility clinics is to have sex every other day during your fertile period (from five to six days before ovulation to one day after). ●