

to arrive at
the end of the
road

honesty is the most

conceive

SENSE: NICK ANDERSON/OMNIS



fertile policy

It may be tempting not to reveal absolutely everything to your doctor—or even to lie (for instance, when they ask about your sex life or your wild past)—but don't give in to the urge. Doctors can't diagnose and treat effectively without full disclosure. Don't worry; they've heard it all before!
By Brette Sember

Julie LeBlanc of Reno, Nevada, remembers that when she and her husband saw a fertility specialist, "Everything is discussed. Nothing is sacred or private." LeBlanc found it hard to be completely honest, particularly about whether she and her husband had sex on the recommended days. She admits she didn't always tell her physician the truth. "It was so hard to go back to the doctor and tell him you missed the window of opportunity. I just couldn't 'fess up on a couple of occasions."

LeBlanc is not alone. Many patients find it difficult to open up about their sex lives, past history, and medical conditions. However, according to Russell Foulk, M.D., medical director of the Nevada Center for Reproductive Medicine in Reno, and the Idaho Center for Reproductive Medicine in Boise, "Honesty between physician and patient is crucial when treating infertility, since it is a disease already filled with myths and misperceptions."

Robin Elise Weiss, author of *The Everything Getting Pregnant Book* (Adams Media, 2004) explains that honesty is essential. "A thorough health history is the starting point for any fertility investigation. If you don't provide completely truthful information, your physician may leave an option unexplored, believing it wouldn't benefit you."

Chinese medicine practitioner Angela Wu, author of *Fertility Wisdom: How Traditional Chinese Medicine Can Help Overcome Infertility* (Rodale, 2006), goes even further; she says that telling the truth is more than just delivering the cold, hard facts. "Honesty does not simply mean answering questions truthfully. It also means owning and expressing your feelings, facing and addressing your fears, and volunteering information that could have a critical impact on your health and your fertility."

Obviously patients don't seek out fertility treatment intending to deceive the doctor, and most would never dream of lying outright. Instead, patients may make oversights, become embarrassed, forget to mention information, or convince themselves that certain things aren't important. Additionally, Weiss believes, "There are couples who give the answers they believe are desired by the practitioner in order to be 'good' patients."

Kate Schoyer, M.D., assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City, understands. "Fertility is one of the most personal things a patient deals with," she says, "not only because fertility is linked with sexuality, but also because an individual's concept of his or her fertility is often intrinsically linked to identity and sense of gender."

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sex, lies, and fertility

There are many topics that need to be discussed candidly with your doctor, particularly the following:

substance use and abuse

Alcohol, tobacco, and "recreational" drugs have important fertility implications for both partners. According to Lawrence Werlin, M.D., medical director of Coastal Fertility Medical Center in Irvine, California, "Women who smoke 10 or more cigarettes a day experience an increased rate of infertility. If the male smokes, nicotine can constrict blood flow to his testicles." Dr. Werlin also points out that chronic abuse of alcohol or drugs has negative effects on male and female fertility.

Before you can be honest with your physician about these issues, you have to be honest with yourself, stresses Angela Wu. "Sometimes clients don't just keep drinking or drug use a secret from me; they keep it a secret from themselves, maintaining a state of denial."


miscarriages and abortions

If you've had a miscarriage or abortion, this is important information for your physician to know. For one thing, having a miscarriage or pregnancy termination in your past is actually good news in a way—either one indicates that you have been able to become pregnant before. The primary concern with an abortion is scarring or infection, but both are low risks. Three or more miscarriages with the same partner is known as recurrent pregnancy loss and is of concern.

Some women feel embarrassed or they worry that they will be judged because of an abortion. "These feelings are unnecessary," emphasizes Dr. Schoyer. "Each patient makes her own right decision at the right time." If you encounter a physician who treats you differently because of events in your past, or because of your current lifestyle, find another.



THOMAS HORTHEUT



Dr. Werlin comments, "I occasionally see patients who had terminations and don't want to share that information with their current partner. On forms we ask the patient if this is information they prefer to keep confidential [from a partner] and we respect their wishes."

sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

Many men and women are embarrassed to admit to their doctor that they had an STD in the past, or may not have told their partner about the infection. Dr. Schoyer emphasizes that telling your doctor, even if you do so without your partner hearing, is necessary. She explains that STDs are important "because [they] can lead to tubal disease," a leading cause of infertility.

sexual practices and frequency of intercourse

Sex is an important topic to discuss with your physician, no matter how uncomfortable you feel talking about it. "This may be the most difficult topic to be open about. Basically a couple has to reveal the most intimate aspects of their personal lives," says Dr. Schoyer. Not only do you need to talk about how often you have sex, but about how often you should be having sex from here on out in order to conceive.

Have sex too often, and your partner's sperm count goes down. Have it not often enough and you might miss that all important window of opportunity. It's crucial to be specific. If a physician asks vaguely whether a couple is having "regular" sex, one couple's regular may mean every night, while another's may be only once every few weeks.

Some patients have sexual problems they are hesitant to bring up. Being open and honest about sexual practices and frequency may reveal sexual dysfunction. "I have had patients not forthcoming about difficulty with having sex," recalls Dr. Schoyer.

If you have problems having intercourse, experience pain, or want to know if there are certain types of intercourse more effective than others, talk to your physician.

prescription and herbal medications

At any preconception medical visit you will probably be asked to complete a questionnaire listing all your prescription medications. It's essential that your physician know exactly what you're taking and at what dosage.

Besides concerns about drug interactions, your physician should also be alert to medications that are not appropriate for use during pregnancy or for a certain period of time prior to conceiving. Although this information is important, sometimes patients simply forget. To make sure you provide your doctor with the right information, create a list at home with information copied directly from the bottles.

Many patients don't realize that herbal medicines, available over-the-counter in many pharmacies and health food stores, can interfere with fertility treatments. Dr. Werlin stresses the importance of discussing any herbal medicines you take with your doctor. "Some herbal medicines can alter hormones and in turn interfere with reproductive treatments," he says, adding that soy in particular can be a problem.

But besides listing all the medications you take, you also need to be honest about whether you're really taking the medications as prescribed. If you're skipping doses, avoiding medication because of side effects, or are simply forgetful, it can have an impact on a drug's effectiveness, whether it's a drug being used for fertility or any other health concerns. Carolyn Kaplan, M.D., director of IVF at Georgia Reproductive Specialists in Atlanta, warns that if you aren't truthful, your doctor may "change medicines unnecessarily because we think the medicine isn't working at the dose [you] are supposed to be taking."

yes to honesty, no to shame

In addition to being honest with your physician, you need to be honest with your partner. It's not uncommon for one member of a couple to keep parts of their past hidden, not wanting to divulge a past STD, drug use or alcohol addiction, miscarriage or abortion. But this is information your doctor will ask about, so it's best to discuss it with your partner first. Even though most physicians will keep information confidential for you if you ask, there are good reasons to discuss things with your partner. "It is incredibly important for a couple to first be honest with each other," says Dr. Werlin. "When they cover up items it becomes a vicious cycle. Sooner or later they end up having to confess the truth."

If there are factors that your doctor should know about but you feel too uncomfortable to say them out loud, author Weiss suggests writing your physician a letter describing the information and indicating you want it to remain confidential. If there are matters you'd rather not discuss with or divulge to your partner, Dr. Fouk recommends requesting a private meeting with your doctor to discuss the subjects. Your physician is committed to helping you conceive, but is also committed to protecting your privacy and remaining non-judgmental about your health and your life. "Patients need to realize that their doctor has seen it all," says Dr. Kaplan. **C**

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