



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ060
PREGNANCY

Later Childbearing

- **Why do women become less fertile as they age?**
- **Why is the risk of complications during pregnancy higher for older women?**
- **How does age affect the risks of genetic disorders?**
- **How can genetic counseling help?**
- **What can I do to prepare for pregnancy if I am older?**
- **What can a woman do if she is already pregnant to reduce her risk of problems?**
- **Glossary**

Why do women become less fertile as they age?

One reason that women may become less fertile is that ovulation, the release of an egg from one of the **ovaries**, occurs less often as a woman ages. Another reason may be that an older woman's eggs are not as easily fertilized as a younger woman's. Also, problems such as blocked **fallopian tubes** and **endometriosis** are more common in older women.

Why is the risk of complications during pregnancy higher for older women?

Because pregnancy puts new demands on a woman's body, the risk of complications during pregnancy is higher for older women. They are more likely to need more frequent prenatal care visits, have special tests, and require special care during labor and delivery.

High blood pressure poses risks to mother and baby, including problems with the **placenta** and with the growth of the **fetus**. High blood pressure also may worsen during pregnancy.

With increasing age, women also are more likely to have diabetes or to develop gestational diabetes (diabetes that occurs during pregnancy). Women with diabetes are at greater risk of high blood pressure, pregnancy loss, and a condition in which a fetus grows too large (macrosomia).

How does age affect the risks of genetic disorders?

A couple's risk of having a baby with a birth defect increases with age. Older women are at increased risk of having a baby with a **chromosome** problem (see the FAQ [Genetic Disorders](#)).

How can genetic counseling help?

Genetic counseling can help you and your partner assess your risks and make an informed choice about getting pregnant or having testing during pregnancy. Genetic counseling involves giving a detailed family history and sometimes having a physical exam along with lab tests. The history and the results of the tests can help the counselor inform a couple of their chance of having a baby with a birth defect.

What can I do to prepare for pregnancy if I am older?

Women of all ages should talk to their health care providers before trying to get pregnant. This is especially important if you are in your 30s and 40s. Visiting a health care provider before pregnancy can help identify whether you are at risk of certain problems and prevent or treat these problems before they can harm you or your baby.

You may need certain tests and immunizations before you become pregnant. Your health care provider also may suggest some of the following lifestyle changes to help you get ready for pregnancy:

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Try to lose weight, if you are overweight or obese.

- Take a folic acid supplement.
- Exercise regularly.
- Stop smoking, drinking alcohol, and taking illegal drugs.
- Reduce stress.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Make sure your immunizations are up to date.

What can a woman do if she is already pregnant to reduce her risk of problems?

If you already are pregnant, getting early and regular prenatal care may increase the chances of having a healthy baby. Many problems, if found early, can be prevented or controlled.

Glossary

Chromosome: A structure that is located inside each cell in the body and contains the genes that determine a person's physical makeup.

Endometriosis: A condition in which tissue similar to that normally lining the uterus is found outside of the uterus, usually on the ovaries, fallopian tubes, and other pelvic structures.

Fallopian Tubes: Tubes through which an egg travels from the ovary to the uterus.

Fetus: A baby growing in the woman's uterus.

Ovaries: Two glands, located on either side of the uterus, that contain the eggs released at ovulation and that produce hormones.

Placenta: Tissue that provides nourishment to and takes waste away from the fetus.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ060: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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