

28 DAYS OF  
GROWTH  
& SELF-CARE

(PRE)  
CONCEPTION  
PLAN



FertilityNorth  
Fertility & Endometriosis Treatment Centre

GynaeNorth



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# WHAT'S THE IDEA?

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Fertility in both men and women has been strongly linked to a person's overall health. This encompasses lifestyle factors and habits, a number of which you may not even think about. At Fertility North, we believe in helping our patients achieve a natural pregnancy first, and then maximising their chances of succeeding with ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology). The chances of pregnancy via both methods improves with basic lifestyle changes.

To help, we have produced this step-by-step preconception health guide. It is designed for you to complete at one chapter a day, for 28 days, just like an average menstrual cycle. Chances are you (or your partner) don't have a by-the-book 28 day cycle, but that won't be a problem. These tasks can be carried out at any time of the month, at your own convenience.

Take the challenge; make 28 achievable changes to your lifestyle – that's one per day. These challenges are designed to help improve the chances of conceiving. You will likely find the best results are achieved with support from a partner, family, or close friends during this period of change and growth.

## What's the goal?

While the journey you're on is exciting, it can also be trying. We want to give you tools and tips for surviving this season of your life, as well as maximising your chances of conceiving.

These suggestions have been compiled based on years of experience treating infertility, but also from hearing first-hand the different struggles, questions, and anxieties that our patients go through. As well as getting you physically fit for

conception, we want to get you mentally fit. This will help you in the months when you may have to endure a negative pregnancy test, and with the new world of stresses that emerge with a positive test.

And who knows? Maybe this is what your body needs to conceive naturally, and you won't need fertility treatment at all. After all, 20% of our patients conceive naturally on a tracking cycle, when proper timing and conception practices are adhered to.

### **What's to gain?**

- Save money.
- Improve mental and physical health.
- Improve your chances for both natural and assisted conception.

Good luck from the team at Fertility North.

*Share your journey: tag #FNchallenge on Instagram to inspire others to take the challenge.*



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## DAY 1

# TAKE STOCK

Today is the day we clear away the clutter in order to start this month fresh. If you have any unhealthy vices, this is the time to nip them in the bud. While you are trying to conceive (and in the event of a pregnancy) stick closely to the following guidelines.

- No smoking. Given the overwhelming evidence of the impact smoking has on male and female fertility, there's never been a better time to quit.
- No illicit drugs - as above.
- No alcohol (See Day 19)

If you have any substance abuse issues, we recommend starting a program to help you quit. There are plenty of free services provided by the State government, which can be accessed through your local General Practitioner. Here's a directory to get you started:

<http://www.adin.com.au/help-support-services/western-australia>

**Chemical Exposure** - If you are exposed to strong chemicals in your workplace this may also affect your fertility. You should discuss any concerns you have about possible exposure with your employer's health and safety representative or equivalent. Investigate the possibility of changing your role and/or do everything that you can to limit this exposure.

**BMI (Body Mass Index)** - take your measurements, as scary as it may seem. Calculate your BMI (this is your weight in kgs divided by your height in metres squared. For example, if you are 165cm and 65kg, then it would be  $65 \div (1.65 \times 1.65) = 24$ ). We're going to work towards the healthy range; 19-24. If you're thinking that's impossible, it's time to change your mindset. (See Day 6).

**Supplements** - You should start taking pre-conception multivitamins today. We can recommend *Elevit* for women and *Menevit* for men, though there are other alternatives too. You want to be taking these for as long as possible before conception. They can improve conception rates and foetal health (*Buhling and Laakmann, 2014*). See Day 12 for more information about the benefits of Folic Acid.

Get excited - you're on your way.





## DAY 2

# OVULATION CALENDAR

If you don't already have one, you're going to need a diary or a calendar. One reason you may not be getting pregnant naturally is an error in timing - i.e. not having sex at the right time in your cycle. Start paying close attention to your body. The more familiar women are with their monthly cycle the easier many find it to get pregnant.

An average menstrual cycle lasts around 28 days, but this is different for every woman. Mark on your calendar the first day of heavy bleeding in your menstrual period if it comes before 12:00 pm. This is referred to as Day 1 in your cycle. If your bleeding comes after 12:00 pm, the following day becomes Day 1. Your cycle length is then the number of days until your next period comes.

### What to record:

- Day 1: First day of heavy bleeding before 12pm; or the following day if bleeding was after 12pm the day before
- Number of days of bleeding
- Approximate day number of ovulation (more information to follow)
- Last day before next period - this determines your cycle length

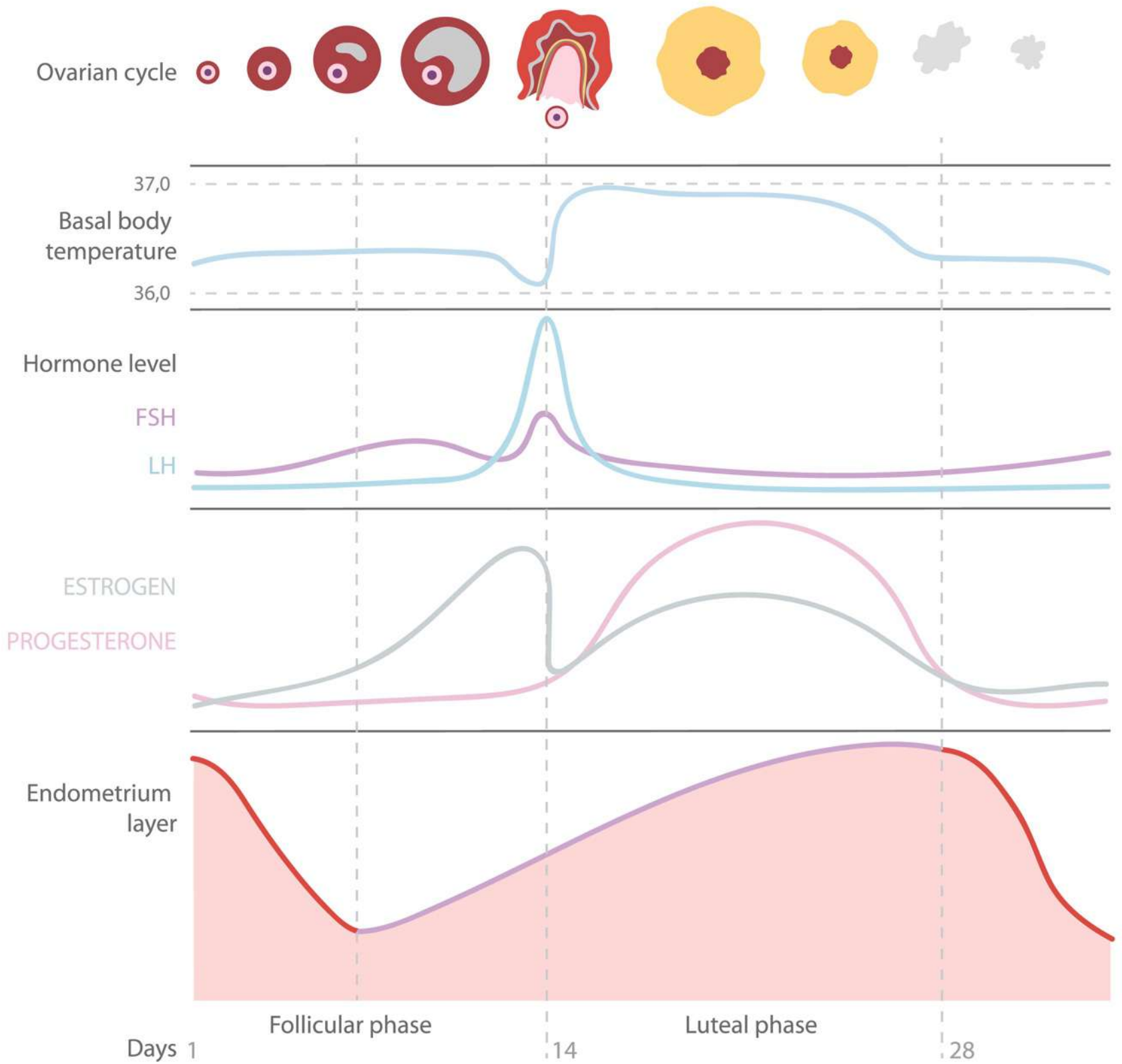
Record your cycles from now on - once is not enough to get a clear picture. It's a valuable diagnostic tool if you discover that your periods are irregular, as it can be a symptom of particular conditions that cause infertility. You should also record when you appear to be ovulating, because you need to have sex in the days prior to and during ovulation to fall pregnant.

There are a few key changes in your body that will suggest you are ovulating:

1. A fall in resting body temperature, followed immediately by an increase in resting body temperature (this will be helpful to you after you've charted your temperature for a few months).
2. Your cervical mucus (vaginal discharge) takes on a more clear and stretchy, "egg white" appearance. If you try to stretch it between two fingers, it should be stringy and elastic. When you are not about to ovulate, it is generally more creamy and thick, and will not stretch.
3. A softening and opening of the cervix (the entry point to the uterus at the top of the vagina).
4. Some women experience sharp abdominal pain on the day of ovulation.

The above provides a rough guide to determining your monthly cycle and the time of ovulation. If required, by conducting a thorough tracking cycle, your fertility specialist will be able to monitor your hormone levels with blood tests throughout your cycle to get a more accurate picture of when you're ovulating, and when you should engage in intercourse.

# MENSTRUAL CYCLE





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## DAY 3

# SEX

While the other sections in this book are going to help you get pregnant, there's only one thing that's essential for a natural conception - sex.

If you know that you are skipping straight to fertility treatment you can go ahead to Day 4.

Ideally, when trying to conceive you should be having sex every second day, particularly around ovulation. It is wise, however, to have a semen analysis performed, so that your doctor can recommend how often to have intercourse based on your results. There are a number of reasons why men may be given specific advice with regard to this:

1. If you have a low sperm count you may need to have days off, without ejaculating, to allow sperm numbers to recover.
2. If there are lots of damaged sperm you may be advised to ejaculate more frequently in the lead up to ovulation, to clear out any accumulated dead and dying sperm.

### **When should we have sex?**

The chance of conception from a single act of intercourse increases from 7 days before ovulation, until it reaches a peak at about 48 hours before ovulation, where it remains until ovulation. Following ovulation the chance of conception falls to zero at about 12 hours post-ovulation.

This is because fertilisation can only occur within hours of ovulation, but sperm can live for up to a week in the female reproductive tract. This was shown in a well-known study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1995 (Wilcox, Weinberg and Baird, 1995). This article also addressed another common question, “Can the sex of children be influenced by the timing of intercourse in relation to ovulation?” finding that it cannot.

## Extra tips for intercourse that can improve your chances:

- Get rid of lubricants, or try sperm-friendly alternatives. Read the label - some lubes contain spermicides that deliberately harm sperm and reduce your chances of conceiving, while some just contain ingredients that impair conception. Look for lubricants that specifically say they are designed to aid conception - some options are: *Astroglide TTC*, *Sliquid Oceanics Natural Lube*, or *Pre-Seed Fertility-Friendly Lubricant*;
- Don't worry about the sperm 'falling out' after intercourse. Immediately after ejaculation the sperm swims towards the egg before any post-coital discharge occurs (before the semen comes back out).
- Try to forget about conceiving. Relax, and focus on connecting with your partner. Many couples who are trying to conceive have found that intercourse becomes almost like a chore. Take the pressure off by occasionally forgetting the 'getting pregnant' bit and just having fun together. After all, half the battle with infertility is remaining sane (see Day 4).



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## DAY 4

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# STRESS MANAGEMENT

There is evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of patients will find infertility, and the resulting treatment, a stressful experience (*Cousineau & Domar, 2007*). It is healthy and wise to have some processes in place when you start out, in the event of prolonged or difficult infertility treatment. It's also common for couples to experience stress on their relationship during infertility, but please remember there are exceptions to every rule - you may experience no issues at all.

For those who do struggle, stress management is essential. A lot of couples fail to conceive due to burnout, which prevents them from trying long enough to achieve a pregnancy (*Gameiro et al., 2012*). If you stay mentally healthy, you will be able to give it your best shot.

This guide will provide a number of ways to manage your stress during this period of time. For today, here are a few preliminary steps you can take to get in the right headspace for everything to come.

- Book a session with a counsellor. As a couple, alone, or both. Counsellors and other mental health professionals not only assist people with mental illnesses, they can also provide education and guidance using stress management techniques that can help you manage day-to-day life. **This should be considered especially if you have a history with depression or anxiety.**
- When feeling stressed, practise breathing deep into your belly. If you struggle with this, lie flat on your back, or lie with your legs bent at the knees for extra release.
- Go for a 20 minute walk.
- Set up a decent scheduling and reminder system - this will be a life saver if taking at-home drug injections (there are plenty of apps for this - ask our staff if you'd like to know more).
- Allow buffer time in your schedule over the next few months - overfilling your week can create unnecessary tension and stress.

Remember; if you ever need to talk, our compassionate staff are here to listen, or to point you in the direction of a professional.





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## DAY 5

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# SLEEP

Quality sleep is very important for overall health. Getting 6-8 hours per night is considered optimal for adults, but just getting enough hours isn't the whole story. Research has shown that we also need good quality sleep (*Pilcher, J., Ginter, D. and Sadowsky, B., 1997*). This means maintaining roughly the same sleeping schedule every night. This will also help regulate your hormones. Create a routine and stick to it - roughly the same bedtime every night.

*'Bedtime'* in the clock function on iPhones is good for this (and free!), but there are countless apps out there for Apple and Android to help create healthy sleeping patterns. Another option is *'Sleep Cycle'* - an app that monitors your sleep patterns, and can rouse you gently when you are sleeping the lightest.

Here are some tips to help you get to sleep easier while you're starting out on a new regime:

- Keep your bedroom cool.
- No caffeine after midday.
- Create a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Stop eating 3 hours before sleep.
- Regular exercise (but not too late at night).



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## DAY 6

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# POSITIVE THINKING

While infertility cannot be cured by meditation and ‘going to your happy place’, having a positive frame of mind is certainly a good starting point in preparation for dealing with the ups and downs of the journey ahead of you.

This month is about preparing for a healthier and happier life. Today is about shifting your headspace, and preparing for change. If you want to improve your health and make physical changes, you will have to start with mental changes - the choice to grow, and the stamina to keep going, comes from the mind, not the body.

There is evidence to indicate that positive affirmations can help in changing your thought processes (*Nelson et al., 2014*). Affirmations welcome change into your life through positive thinking and acceptance. They should be spoken aloud and/or written on post-it notes - anything that helps to constantly remind you - to achieve the greatest effect. You can also make commitments to yourself to stay in a positive mindset. Here are a few examples to get you going:

- I fill my mind with positive and nourishing thoughts
- I wake in the morning feeling happy and enthusiastic about life
- I live in the present and am confident of the future
- I nourish my body with healthy food
- I observe my thoughts and actions without judging them
- I make the best of any situation
- I am healthy and happy
- I am physically and mentally prepared for pregnancy and for childbirth and raising children.
- I learn from my experiences and grow as a person
- We will conceive and give birth to a healthy baby

You will find the most beneficial affirmations are those that counter your own specific fears, concerns and negative thoughts. This is a helpful practice you can continue as long as it is helpful. Like most habits, it's a matter of working it into your routine. If you are travelling this path with a partner, you can support and encourage each other to do this.

## DAY 7

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# WEEKLY REFLECTION

*“A bend in the road is not the end of the road... unless you fail to make the turn.”*

~ Unknown

### Consider the following questions:

1. What changes were you able to make straight away? Acknowledge your successes.
2. Which tasks excited you? What changes are you looking forward to?
3. Which suggestions did you balk at, or struggle to find time for? Could you have a go today? What's holding you back?
4. What are the things you're going to stay on top of this week? What habits will you continue to work into your schedule?
5. Are there any bad habits you're holding on to that will hold you back? Consider the pros and cons of staying the same. Make a change.





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## DAY 8

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# DIETARY HABITS

What you eat has a large impact on your health, and with better overall health your body will be better prepared for conception. Another benefit is that if there is something more serious contributing towards your infertility, your doctor will be able to identify it faster if you are generally healthy.

Examine your dietary habits. How does your lifestyle affect the way you eat?

Does snoozing your alarm in the morning mean that you resort to a breakfast of coffee and a muffin? Or maybe you run out of groceries and have to grab a takeaway? We'll go into diet in more detail on Day 11 – today is designed to start you thinking about small changes you could make to your routine that might make healthy eating easier for you.

Here are a few examples of healthy habits:

- Prepare extra quantities of your favourite meals over the weekend or on a day off. Freeze them, and then use them throughout the week, as a healthier and cheaper alternative to frozen meals or takeaway.
- Keep healthy snacks, like nuts, seeds, and fruit on hand, in the cupboard at home and at work.
- Bring a packed lunch to work to avoid ordering large portions from the canteen, or fast food.

Try and make one change today. If you have time for a more in-depth look at your dietary habits, try keeping a food diary for a few days. Write down everything you eat, what time you eat it, if you were hungry before eating and how full you felt afterwards. You can learn a lot about your dietary habits by doing this. You could also visit the Dietitians' Association of Australia website and take their "Healthy Eating Quiz" ([www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au)). They also have information on how to improve your diet as well as healthy recipes.

If you're trying to conceive as a couple, you have the added benefit of living with someone who can encourage you and help keep you on track. Remember - health and lifestyle have an effect on both male and female fertility. The health of both biological parents will influence your child's health.

### **Healthy Eating Agreement:**

I will make the following change to my dietary habits this week... (stick this message on your fridge!)





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DAY 9

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## TARGET BMI

BMI is a measurement that can give a good indication of how appropriate your weight is for a person of your stature. It is not an exact science as it doesn't take into account a person's muscle mass. If you are an athletic person consider having a Body Fat Scan performed to get a more accurate result.

An unhealthy BMI can reduce your chances of both conceiving, and maintaining a pregnancy to term (*Rooney and Domar, 2014*). A BMI on either side of the standard 'healthy' range (BMI less than 18 or greater than 25) can cause ovulatory dysfunction (OD) and infertility.

1. **If you are above the healthy weight range (BMI>25);** managing your weight is one of the most proactive lifestyle changes that you can make to improve fertility. We cannot emphasise enough the importance of taking weight loss seriously for obese patients (BMI>30), who will experience so many more complications and expenses on their path to becoming parents. Something else you may need to consider is that most IVF clinics in Australia have an upper BMI limit for women, beyond which they cannot offer treatment, for the safety of both the mother and any unborn children. Here's what you can do about it today:

- Consult a dietitian for advice and guidance on improving your dietary habits. It's hard to make such a huge change on your own - so ask for help. If you would like a referral, you can ask your specialist. However you may be eligible for Medicare rebates if you are referred through a GP on what is known as a 'Management Plan'. Our staff can give you more information about this.
- Avoid fad diets or extreme weight loss products - remember; good nutrition is still essential to prepare your body for a pregnancy.
- Make the decision, and stop making excuses. Weight loss is hard work, but you need to ask yourself - is it worth it? Weight issues impact fertility treatment success rates. Whatever your path, give your body the best chance it has.

2. **If you are below the healthy weight range (BMI<18);** AND if you are also experiencing irregular periods, your weight may be preventing you from conceiving. If that is the case, discuss your concerns with a doctor, and consider seeking advice from a dietitian.

If your periods are normal, you may still want to seek advice from a dietitian - a healthy weight will create a better environment in your body to sustain a pregnancy, and can reduce risk of premature birth, or giving birth to an underweight baby.

3. **If you are within the healthy BMI range**, you can likely still improve your overall health with dietary improvements, such as increasing your vitamin and nutrient intake, and eating unprocessed foods, which is discussed in more detail on Day 11.



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DAY 10

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# EXERCISE

Regular, moderate-intensity exercise is essential for good health, and, as we have discussed, the better your overall health the better your chances of conceiving. Having a healthy BMI will reduce the time taken to conceive. Even if your BMI is within the healthy range, exercise is still a part of a healthy lifestyle. It helps you fight disease, improves bone health, boosts your mood and energy, and encourages

better sleep (see Day 5). If you are overweight, exercise (along with a good diet) is key to helping you move towards a healthy BMI.

## Women

There is a lot of misinformation about how hard you can exercise when trying to conceive, so let's try to clear things up:

1. If you're a healthy adult with a normal BMI, you can exercise as hard as you like. It's only during pregnancy when you should avoid heavy exercise, or anything that overheats your body (*betterhealth.vic.gov.au, 2017*).
2. For overweight women, weight loss will reduce your chance of miscarriage (*Ritternberg et al., 2011*). Exercise is important, but doesn't have to be as intense as you may think. Regular, low intensity exercise, paired with diet changes, will optimise weight loss.
3. If you're underweight, exercising too hard can cause irregular periods or stop them altogether. If you think this might be the case for you, hold off on intensive exercise and discuss your concerns with your doctor.

The above are general tips - for specific advice speak with your doctor.

## Men

If you are otherwise healthy, you pretty much can't overdo it here. However there are a couple of things you should know that will help you optimise your sperm quality:

1. A lower body fat percentage will regulate your hormone levels and improve semen quality (*Craig et al., 2017*), so look at muscle building exercises, paired with healthy eating for fat reduction.
2. Steroid and testosterone supplements are known to damage sperm and reduce sperm counts, which can cause infertility. This may sound counter-intuitive to you, as testosterone is required for sperm production. However, supplementing

the hormone artificially stops your body from producing it naturally, which will shut down sperm production.

3. Some studies have suggested that prolonged time bicycling can diminish sperm quality due to the pressure it places on the genital area (*Wise, Cramer, Hornstein, Ashby & Missmer, 2011*). It may be worth trying other sports (or means of transport) while you are trying to conceive, or adjusting the way you ride to minimise pressure and heat in the groin area.
4. Avoid high contact sports in which you may sustain a groin injury, or alternatively, use protective gear.



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DAY 11

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# EATING FOR FERTILITY

At the clinic we are commonly asked “are there any supplements or dietary changes that might improve my fertility?” This topic has been widely studied and debated. We have summarised below a digestible overview of the most recent research.

The following foods and nutrients have been found to affect fertility in clinical trials:

- Polyunsaturated fats appear to have a beneficial effect on fertility, while trans fats are associated with ovulatory dysfunction (OD), because they increase insulin resistance, which is damaging to fertility.\*
- Low GI (glycemic-index) carbohydrates are better for ovulatory function than high GI, but the total amount of carbohydrates eaten should be low.
- Increased dietary protein with no calorie restriction has been shown to improve weight loss and glucose metabolism, both of which are associated with good ovulatory function.
- The type of protein consumed also appears to be significant. Studies have shown that diets rich in animal protein are associated with OD, and that by switching as little as 5% of an individual's diet from animal-based foods to plant-based foods, can reduce OD related infertility by 50%.\*\*
- The dairy content of diets has also been studied, but data remains inconsistent. However there is a general agreement within the literature that low fat dairy products are associated with OD.

By taking this kind of information and applying it to a large group of women, investigators have come up with what has been termed “The Fertility Diet”. The key study in this area\*\*\* showed that certain dietary features were associated with a 69% reduction in OD related fertility.

*\*The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) in the USA have recently moved to ban trans fats completely.*

*\*\*It is suspected that the mechanism for this effect could be related to hormone residues in beef, as cattle are treated with anabolic steroids for the last 60-90 days before slaughter to increase their size in Australia, New Zealand and the USA.*

*\*\*\*This study, known as The Nurse’s Health Study, analysed the diets of 116,000 female American nurses who were enrolled in the study. This has so far been the most important study of its kind, with most of the studies that followed merely supporting the claims that had already been made.*



## Diet Composition:

- Higher protein consumption
- More plant (rather than animal) protein
- Higher monounsaturated fats intake
- Lower trans fats intake
- Higher full fat dairy and reduced low fat dairy consumption
- An overall low carbohydrate (particularly sugar) intake

These findings have been supported by similar findings looking at other cohorts of women, and the evidence is generally regarded as strong.

## What does this diet look like in practice?

- Very brown bread with seeds such as soy and linseed bread (low GI and rich in monounsaturated fats)
- Olive oil
- Fish and poultry
- Full fat milk
- Plenty of vegetables, particularly avocado (rich in folic acid)
- Nuts (rich source of plant protein).

## Things to avoid:

- Fast food
- Refined carbohydrates
- Alcohol
- Excessive (more than the recommended daily intake) Vitamin A.

## Nutrition for Improving Sperm Quality

Your diet has a significant impact on the wellbeing of your sperm. Nutrients such as zinc, selenium, certain amino acids and vitamins C, E and B12 all play an important role in sperm production. A male-fertility supplement, such as Menevit, will contain specific nutrients and antioxidants shown to improve sperm quality.

For optimal sperm production you should support this with a balanced healthy diet including:

- Fruit
- Vegetables
- Grains
- Pulses
- Lean Meat
- Seafood

Healthy eating will also help you to maintain a healthy weight and body fat percentage. Overweight men have been shown to have lower sperm counts and reduced motility when compared with men in a normal weight range, and diet is the most important factor when it comes to losing weight.



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**DAY 12**

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## FOLIC ACID

By now you should be taking a folate/folic acid supplement, or multivitamin that contains 400 mg folic acid.

Folate is a B group vitamin needed for healthy cell growth, and is essential for the healthy development of babies in early pregnancy. Ensuring you are taking adequate folate during this vital period (which can be before you even know you're

pregnant) helps to reduce the possibility of a baby developing serious brain or spinal birth defects.

Foods that are naturally high in folate include avocado, spinach, broccoli, and other leafy greens. Folate can also be added artificially to foods such as breakfast cereals - this information should be readily available on the food packaging. In Australia, it is mandatory that all bread making flour, except organic flour, contains added folic acid. However to ensure you get enough folic acid, you should take a folic acid supplement.

As we said on Day 1, you should supplement your folic acid intake for as long as possible before you actually conceive, for optimal infant and pregnancy health (*Wilson et al., 2015*). It's a good idea to make sure your multivitamin contains all the B vitamins. You can complement this with foods that are naturally high in folate, but supplements are the easiest way to get enough into your diet consistently.



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DAY 13

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# BREAKFAST

Having a nutritious breakfast is an excellent dietary habit, and helpful with maintaining your hydration levels if you're having frequent blood tests for infertility treatment. There's also new research to suggest that eating a large breakfast can have a positive impact on women struggling with PCOS - a common cause of infertility (*Jabowicz et al., 2013*).

A balanced breakfast contains a mix of wholegrain carbohydrates, good quality protein (eg. eggs, cheese, milk, avocado), vegetables and fruit. Struggling to find filling and healthy options?

### **Suggestions for a good breakfast:**

1. Smashed avocado and sprinkled feta on two slices of whole-grain/linseed toast
  - Avocado is an excellent natural source of folic acid (See Day 12)
2. Unsweetened muesli or porridge, served with greek yogurt and fresh berries
  - Oats are a low glycemic-index grain that can also help lower cholesterol
3. A vegetarian cooked breakfast
  - Eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, spinach, and toast with avocado instead of butter can make a very healthy alternative to the traditional Full English breakfast.
4. A fresh smoothie, containing a mix of:
  - fresh fruit or berries
  - oats or quinoa
  - milk or vegan milk
  - yogurt, spinach, kale, nuts, seeds, etc

### **Caffeine**

Studies have suggested that a woman is more likely to miscarry if she or her partner drink more than two cups of caffeinated drinks a day during the weeks leading up to conception (*Weng, Odouli and Li, 2008*). In light of this, you may want to err on the side of caution and ditch the breakfast coffee for the preconception period.

## DAY 14

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# WEEKLY REFLECTION

*“When life takes the wind out of your sails, it is to test you at the oars.”*

~ Robert Brault

### Consider the following questions:

1. What changes were you able to make straight away? Acknowledge your successes.
2. Which tasks excited you? What changes are you looking forward to?
3. Which suggestions did you balk at, or struggle to find time for? Could you have a go today? What's holding you back?
4. What are the things you're going to stay on top of this week? What habits will you continue to work into your schedule?
5. Are there any bad habits you're holding on to that will hold you back? Consider the pros and cons of staying the same. Make a change.







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**DAY 15**

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# TEMPERATURE CONTROL

**FOR MEN** - An interesting fact about sperm production is that it can be affected by the temperature of the testes. Your testicles have a system of regulating their temperature to keep it within an optimal range. This is why when it is cold they move in closer to your body and your core body heat, and when it is hot they move further away so that they can cool down.

You need to make sure you don't accidentally do anything that prevents this temperature regulation from occurring, or over-heat your genital area by other means. Here are some precautions you can take:

- Avoid tight underwear/jeans - they prevent the testicles from cooling down, because they are unable to move from your body.
- Avoid jacuzzis/spas/hot baths.
- Keep your laptop off your lap (laptops are now largely referred to as 'notebook' computers, to avoid the assumption that they should sit on the lap).



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DAY 16

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## REGULATE MELATONIN

Melatonin is a hormone that is naturally produced at night to prepare the body for sleep. The release of this hormone is activated by darkness, causing alertness to decline, and sleep to become more inviting. If you inhibit your body's exposure to darkness at night, or use screens or bright lights in the bedroom, you can reduce the release of melatonin. For most people this can just mean more restlessness, but for women trying to conceive, melatonin is more important.

“Pregnant women who have low melatonin levels are more likely to develop pre-eclampsia, intrauterine growth restriction, and other disorders than can have disastrous effects on both mother and child. In addition, women who receive melatonin supplements while undergoing IVF, and throughout the rest of the pregnancy, have healthier blastocyst development as well as more positive pregnancy outcomes” (*Chronobiology.com, 2017*).

Here are some simple steps you can take to give a natural boost to your melatonin levels:

1. Maintain a regular sleep schedule (as discussed on Day 5).
2. Limit screen time at night.
3. Read before sleep instead of watching TV.
4. Consider investing in block-out curtains and dimmed lamps in the bedroom, so you can keep the room dark before and during sleep.

If you think this may be a problem for you, ask your doctor or one of our nurses about melatonin supplements.



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DAY 17

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## ORAL HYGIENE

There's research to indicate that gum disease might be linked to some women taking longer to get pregnant (*Nwhator et al., 2014*). There is also research to suggest poor oral hygiene may affect sperm quality (*Klinger et al., 2011*). Since good oral hygiene is an excellent practice to adopt at all times in your life, what more reason do you need to start improving your oral hygiene now?

## Steps to good oral health:

1. Call a dentist's office today and make an appointment to have a clean and a check-up if you haven't been for 6 months or more.
2. Brush thoroughly and floss every morning and night.
3. Your dentist will also tell you to stay away from sugary sweets and soft drinks - listen to them! It's good advice for maintaining a healthy lifestyle, not just good teeth.



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DAY 18

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# HYDRATION

Keeping hydrated allows every bodily function to work as efficiently as it can. For optimal health, it is recommended that women have 2 litres of fluids a day, and men have 2.5 litres (*Betterhealth.vic.gov.au, 2017*). This increases to 3 litres for pregnant women. If you don't think your current intake is adequate, look for ways to increase it.

## Tips to stay hydrated:

- Water, milk, soup, juice and fresh fruit are all great sources of fluid.
- Water is the best drink for hydrating the body. Choose tap water over filtered or spring - the fluoride in tap water is great for oral health (see Day 17)
- Get a stainless steel or glass water bottle and carry it around with you. Not only will it encourage you to drink water more regularly, but it will stop you from drinking from plastic water bottles, protecting you from possible exposure to BPA (Bisphenol A, a compound used to make plastic water bottles which has been linked to health problems in fetuses and newborns (*Huo et al., 2015*)). Most plastic bottles are BPA free these days, you are more likely to find BPA in the lining of some canned products.





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DAY 19

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# ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

It is usually women who are advised to abstain from alcohol intake during pregnancy and even before conception. Recent research has shown that men should also be heeding this advice if they want to ensure their sperm is of top quality.

## Women

It is well known that women should avoid alcohol during pregnancy, but what about preconception?

Any alcohol consumption during pregnancy can expose an unborn child to a range of possible adverse effects. By cutting out alcohol before conception, you will prevent your baby from exposure to alcohol during early pregnancy - when the foetus is most vulnerable to structural damage (*Alcoholthinkagain.com.au, 2017*). These newborns are then prone to developing behavioural, physical and cognitive disabilities later in life. The safest course of action is to stop drinking as soon as possible - i.e. today.

## Men

There is compelling research which demonstrates that high alcohol intake will adversely affect sperm. Studies show that the more men drink, the lower the:

- semen concentration,
- total sperm count, and
- percentage of sperm with normal shape.

This relationship was observed in men who drank as little as 5 alcohol units per week (*Fullston, McPherson, Zander-Fox and Lane, 2017*). There have also been studies which found preconception drinking in men could increase the risk of miscarriage, and have adverse effects on the health of any children born (*Henriksen, 2004*).

Our recommendation is for both partners to cut out alcohol completely during the preconception period. This will then continue into pregnancy for women.



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DAY 20

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# COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY

As a licensed and fully accredited medical treatment centre, it is difficult for us to recommend alternative therapies that are not supported by comprehensive scientific research. However, infertility is an extremely complex condition, and there is much that the scientific and medical communities are yet to understand. There is also a

growing body of evidence to demonstrate that fertility is impacted by emotional and psychological factors (*Klonoff-Cohen et al., 2001*)

If you are interested in experimenting with alternative fertility treatments, we encourage you to give it a try, but be sure to do so in consultation with your doctor (to ensure you're not taking or doing anything that might do more harm than good).

In fact, many of our patients have expressed an interest in having acupuncture on the day of their embryo transfers. In response, we have organised for this service to be available at our clinic. You can read more about this on our website - [www.fertilitynorth.com.au/complementary-treatments/](http://www.fertilitynorth.com.au/complementary-treatments/)

**In summary:**

1. Ask your doctor about any complementary therapies that interest you to make sure they're safe.
2. If you have no interest in complementary treatments, then do not feel any obligation to use them.

## DAY 21

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# WEEKLY REFLECTION

*“Once you choose hope, anything’s possible”*

~ Christopher Reeve

### Consider the following questions:

1. What changes were you able to make straight away? Acknowledge your successes.
2. Which tasks excited you? What changes are you looking forward to?
3. Which suggestions did you balk at, or struggle to find time for? Could you have a go today? What’s holding you back?
4. What are the things you’re going to stay on top of this week? What habits will you continue to work into your schedule?
5. Are there any bad habits you’re holding on to that will hold you back? Consider the pros and cons of staying the same. Make a change.





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DAY 22

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## ME TIME

Solitude can help us refresh and recharge ourselves, making us better equipped to deal with the rest of our lives. You will probably find that solitude equips you to better support your partner, so don't feel guilty about needing time alone! In fact, we insist that you do. No need for guilt - it's doctor's orders.

Schedule some empty time into your day today - ideally over half an hour. Turn off your phone, or turn it to Do Not Disturb. Treat yourself to exactly what you want to do, without having to consider someone else's wishes.

If you don't know what to do, think back on your favourite activities as a child. What did you like to do before you cared what the world thought about it? What are the little luxuries that you deny yourself - maybe they're impractical, maybe they're just plain silly. The sillier the better! The beauty of 'me time' is strengthening your sense of self, so take time to ask yourself what you really want, and not just fall into your normal habits of what you always do to relax. But of course, if you know that you love nothing more than reading sci-fi novels in the bath, then by all means go for it!

Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Go for a long walk
- Homemade popcorn and a movie
- Photograph the sunset
- Bake something
- Go for a bike ride
- Apply a face mask and soak in the tub (but not too hot! See Day 15)
- Play a video game
- Make sandcastles at the beach
- Visit an art gallery
- Binge-watch your favourite TV show
- Take a random class - salsa dancing, karate, painting, cooking
- Put on your favourite song and sing at the top of your voice

The sky is the limit here. Have fun, relax, or go wild!





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**DAY 23**

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# YOGA

As we mentioned on Day 4, stress and infertility have a significant correlation, and infertility patients who engage in stress management have demonstrated better treatment outcomes in a number of studies (*Rockliff et al., 2014*). One useful method for reducing stress is Yoga, which has which has been shown to improve infertility treatment outcomes.

Yoga not only helps with relaxation but it also leads to improved muscle tone, blood flow, flexibility and balance, therefore it can be a great tool to help women prepare for childbirth. It is also a low-intensity exercise, making it a great way for women to stay in shape during pregnancy.

There are innumerable yoga classes you can take throughout Perth - a quick Google search will provide you with options in your local area. An app that is helpful for this is '*MINDBODY*' - a booking guide for nearby fitness and wellness classes.

If you are budget-conscious, there are a growing number of yoga classes available for free on Youtube, or Yoga apps can be purchased on your smartphone for a small fee. All you need is a mat, a screen, and a little space - maybe a buddy to join you.



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**DAY 24**

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# JOURNALLING

If you don't visit a therapist to have a good vent (although this isn't a bad idea), it's natural to bottle up your feelings about life and about your fertility. It's great to be able to talk to your support network and communicate openly in that way, but they won't always be fully equipped to deal with what you're going through. For some, it can feel like you're burdening loved ones with problems they can't help you with.

If this is you, one great strategy to try is journalling. You get to express everything you're feeling to a very patient listener: a blank page. Allow these feelings to come out and validate them as justified and real. The joy of paper is that it is entirely non-judgemental, so don't ruin it by judging your own words.

Try journalling your thoughts and feelings first thing in the morning when you wake up. This helps clear away the worries and gives you a clean start to the day. By thinking about the day that is to come and possibly setting some goals, you can live more deliberately and effectively. Alternatively you might like to reflect on the day's events in the evening - write about what went well, what you're grateful for, etc. This can be really helpful if you struggle falling asleep at night.

Keep writing for at least a page. Perhaps try writing in a beautiful notebook with a nice pen - you'll enjoy it more.

**For women** - If you keep a written record of how your body changes during different stages of your cycle, you will be able to monitor your ovulation much more easily. Recording how you are feeling physically will give you a better understanding of your cycle in following months.



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25

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# VISUALISATION AND PLANNING

*“By failing to prepare, you are preparing  
to fail.”*

~ Benjamin Franklin

There are a number of practical steps you can take now to make life easier during your treatment and/or pregnancy. By planning ahead you can be prepared for any road blocks, helping you stay relaxed and focused on the goal.

1. Clear your schedule. You will need extra time to prepare yourself and your body for conception, as outlined in earlier chapters. If you can't get time off work then clear out your evenings and weekends. Allow plenty of room for doctors visits, ultrasounds, blood tests, and other treatments.
2. Picture your future - visualise how you want it to be and make it very specific and detail oriented.
3. Prepare yourself for the possibility that things may not go according to plan, and develop strategies on how you can best manage such changes along the way.
4. You may like to investigate the maternity and/or paternity allowances at your workplace. If you start thinking about arrangements now it's less likely to creep up on you.

Whatever your journey looks like, the Fertility North team is here to help and support you at every step.



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**DAY 26**

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# NIGHT OUT

## **For Couples:**

We hear all the time from patients about the pressures that infertility places on a relationship, and the clinical nature of the process can impact on a couple's intimacy. It's important to find ways to connect as a couple, without the pressure of trying to get pregnant, equipping you to better love and support each other in the months to come.

For that reason, we'd like you to take tonight off and go on a date. Yes, life is busy and you have responsibilities, but this is important. If you have plans tonight then book it in for your next free evening. You need a night where your only responsibility is to have fun. And no, take-away and Netflix does not count. Need some inspiration?

- Break out the essential oils and give each other a massage
- Read a book to each other
- Go out dancing together like you're 18 years old
- Go for a walk on the beach
- Relive your first date
- Go to the markets

You get the idea. Put in a little extra effort and see what happens.

### **For Individuals:**

Sometimes those going through infertility treatment can experience isolation from their friends and families. These issues are complicated and you may feel awkward talking about them or you may fear a lack of understanding or judgement.

We'd like for you to take this opportunity to reconnect with your support network, as it can only help you in the months to come. This may mean going for dinner with your parents, having a night out with friends, or catching up with a close friend for coffee. Strengthen the connections in your life so you won't be afraid to reach out for support if you need it.



## DAY 27

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# LET GO

*“To achieve the life you want, you must first give up the life you have.”*

~ Carolyn Moss

Ultimately, there are some things that you just can't control, whether it's how many attempts it will take to fall pregnant, or never getting that positive test. All you can do is try, and no amount of worrying, thinking, stressing, analysing or Googling can change that, it can only make you miserable. Now is a great time to begin the art of self-compassion, and of acceptance. The 'what ifs' and 'if onlys' will only hurt you.

As you begin this journey, remember that even if you are not successful with fertility treatment, there are other options for expanding your family. You may like to look into them now. This is not preparing for failure - it's being open to a different path. Feel free to bring this up with our compassionate team, or speak to our counsellor.

Remember; there is bravery and strength in what you are doing, so please go easy on yourself, and stay positive.

## DAY 28

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# FINAL REFLECTION

*“If something is important enough, even if the odds are against you, you should still do it.”*

~ Elon Musk

### Consider the following questions:

1. What progress have you achieved this month?
2. Which suggestions did you struggle to find time for? Are these things something you could have a go at in the weeks to come?
3. What are the things you're going to continue with moving forward? Are there any habits that you will continue to work into your schedule?
4. Are there any bad habits you're holding on to? Revisit any relevant sections, and consider what the cost may be of resisting change.



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# GLOSSARY

**Blastocyst**

An embryo that has reached 5 days of development.

**BMI (Body Mass Index)**

BMI compares your weight to your height, and is calculated by dividing your weight (in kilograms) by your height (in metres squared). It gives you an idea of whether you're 'underweight', a 'healthy' weight, 'overweight', or 'obese' for your height. BMI is one type of tool to help health professionals assess the risk for chronic disease. Another important tool is waist circumference. It is also important to understand your other risk factors. - *Source: The Heart Foundation.*

**Complementary Therapy**

Also known as 'alternative medicine', 'holistic therapy' and 'traditional medicine'. This is a broad, umbrella term for therapies aimed at treating a person as a whole, rather than specific symptoms. Complementary therapies are used alongside conventional medicine, but should not be treated as a substitute, as the same rigorous models of scientific testing and evaluation do not apply for such therapies.

**Folic Acid**

Folic acid is a form of vitamin B9, which can also be in the form of Folate. The recommended daily intake is 400mg.

**Glycemic Index (GI)**

GI represents the rise in a person's blood glucose level two hours after consuming certain foods. As a general rule, low GI foods are considered healthier, as they do not raise your blood sugar as high or as fast as high GI foods.

**Melatonin**

Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone that is secreted in humans in inverse proportion to the amount of light received by the retina, to regulate the sleep cycle. It is also available in artificial form as a supplement.

**Ovulation**

To produce and release eggs from an ovary or ovarian follicle, as part of a female's regular menstrual cycle.

**Ovulatory Dysfunction (OD)**

OD is characterised by an abnormal, irregular, or lack-of monthly release of a woman's egg (ovulation).

## **PCOS (Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome)**

PCOS is a long term condition brought on by elevated levels of male hormones (androgens) in women, which can render sufferers infertile without treatment. Symptoms include irregular periods, acne, facial hair, and pelvic pain.



## USEFUL LINKS

<https://www.fertilitysociety.com.au/>

The Fertility Society of Australia is the peak body representing scientists, doctors, researchers, nurses, consumers & counsellors in reproductive medicine in Australia & New Zealand.

<http://access.org.au/> - Australia's National Infertility Network

A national consumer based infertility association.

<http://www.rtc.org.au/> - Reproductive Technology Council (WA)

The Reproductive Technology Council regulates all assisted reproductive technology practices in Western Australia.

<https://www.andrologyaustralia.org/> - Andrology Australia

Andrology Australia is a community & professional education programme providing information on male reproductive health.

<https://npsu.unsw.edu.au/> - National Perinatal Statistics Unit (NPSU)

The National Perinatal Statistics Unit provides information & statistics from Australia & New Zealand on reproductive & perinatal health.

<http://yourfertility.org.au/> Your Fertility

Your Fertility is a national public education program funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and the Victorian Government Department of Health.

<https://www.varta.org.au/information-and-support> - VARTA

VARTA is the Victorian body for reproductive technologies, so some information on their website will be written for different state laws. However we have included it because of the wonderful support resources they offer for those going through infertility treatment - particularly for donor assisted conception.

# GOOD LUCK!

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*This book has been written, compiled and cross-examined by the staff at Fertility North - a fertility and endometriosis treatment centre in Perth, Western Australia.*

*All content has been reviewed by Fertility North's Medical Director - Dr Vince Chapple.*

*Dedicated to all those with children in their hearts, but not yet in their arms.*

*#FNchallenge*

# FERTILITY NORTH

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Fertility North is a fertility and endometriosis treatment clinic in Perth, Western Australia. Our Joondalup practice is the only clinic of its kind in the northern suburbs of Perth, allowing Fertility North to provide local care to our clients. We take pride in giving patients a personalised treatment experience, and work hard to deliver high level care to every individual we welcome to our clinic.

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