- Women—health and hygiene

Good nutrition vital to improving female fertility

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FOR most married couples, especially newlyweds, having a child is a shared dream, whether as soon as possible or at a time that best suits their lifestyle. As a result, many take deliberate steps to plan for pregnancy.



However, for some couples, repeated attempts to conceive end in disappointment, even when both husband and wife are physically healthy and have good fertility levels.

According to experts, effective pregnancy planning entails thorough physical and internal readiness. And, among the most crucial yet frequently underestimated aspects are diet and daily nutrient intake.

In the reality of modern life, healthy eating habits are often neglected. Fast food, high-sugar beverages and unbalanced diets become convenient choices, without realising that such habits may pose long-term risks to fertility.

Early steps

Fertility specialist Dr Raihana Ismail said healthy nutrition is a vital first step in improving female fertility, as the hormonal system requires sufficient nutrients to function optimally.

She said consuming nutritious food not only supports the production of reproductive hormones but also helps reduce stress and inflammation in the body—factors which, if prolonged, can negatively affect the chances of conception.

"When both husband and wife adopt a balanced diet that includes adequate protein, healthy fats, and essential vitamins and minerals, it indirectly helps stabilise body weight, regulate the menstrual cycle and improve the quality of eggs or sperm produced.

“Healthy eating also helps lower stress levels, which can otherwise disrupt hormonal balance and make it difficult for a woman to conceive. It also supports better daily energy levels and helps maintain longterm uterine health,” she told Bernama.

Elaborating, Dr Raihana said an unbalanced daily diet can have a direct impact on a woman’s menstrual cycle, thereby influencing fertility.

“A deficiency in key nutrients such as iron, protein, folic acid, zinc and healthy fats can lead to irregular menstruation, ovulation problems and chronic fatigue, all of which can make conception more difficult.

“Those who consume excessive sugar and rely heavily on processed foods are also at higher risk of hormonal disturbances due to insulin resistance and inflammation in the body.

“Therefore, proper nutrient intake is essential to support ovulation and overall reproductive health,” she said, adding that adequate water intake is also important.

She stressed that regular meal times and a healthy lifestyle, including sufficient quality sleep, are also crucial in maintaining hormonal balance.

Dr Raihana, who is also the founder and chief executive officer of Efferty International Sdn Bhd —a company that produces supplements specially formulated to assist individuals facing difficulty conceiving—said healthy nutrition and lifestyle habits should be cultivated from an early stage.

Nutrients

According to Dr Raihana, women who are planning to conceive need to ensure their bodies receive adequate nutrients to support fertility.

Among the key nutrients are protein, iron, folic acid, calcium, vitamin D, omega-3 fatty acids, and foods rich in antioxidants.

“Protein helps in the formation of hormones and reproductive cells (ova and sperm). Iron supports the transport of oxygen in the blood, while folic acid is essential for egg quality.

“Omega-3 helps maintain hormonal balance, while antioxidant-rich foods protect cells from damage. Calcium and vitamin D are important for hormonal health and a healthy uterus.”

She added that women who are trying to conceive are encouraged to consume more green vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, fish, eggs and lean meats.

High-caffeine and carbonated beverages should be avoided as they may reduce the chances of pregnancy.

“Taking supplements or foods containing inositol and DHA (an omega-3 fatty acid) can also support hormonal balance, regulate the menstrual cycle and improve the quality of both sperm and ova.

“Foods containing fibrulose (dietary fibre), as well as live cultures that promote gut health, can help improve nutrient absorption and support overall women’s health,” she added.

Dr Raihana also cautioned women against following extreme diets as these can disrupt fertility.

She explained that unhealthy eating patterns may lead to irregular menstrual cycles and increase the risk of developing polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

For men, she said, an unhealthy diet tends to reduce both the quality and quantity of sperm, which in turn affects fertility and lowers the couple’s chances of conceiving.

“On the other hand, a balanced diet helps improve sperm health and motility, thereby supporting the couple’s journey towards pregnancy,” she said.

Treatment options

Meanwhile, Dr Raihana advised women to consult a fertility specialist if they experience difficulty conceiving despite maintaining a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle.

She said fertility specialists will assess various factors, including hormonal balance, the condition of the fallopian tubes, and egg quality, before recommending appropriate treatment or guidance to improve the chances of pregnancy.

“I would like to emphasise that any woman who has a uterus still has a chance of becoming pregnant, even if she has been married for a long time. Pregnancy is possible as long as her ovulation is normal, hormones are balanced, and the reproductive system is functioning well.

“However, factors such as age, hormonal issues, lifestyle, stress or other health conditions may slightly reduce the chances. So do not lose hope as there are now many ways to help increase the likelihood of conceiving,” she said.

According to her, women who are unable to conceive naturally still have opportunities to become pregnant through modern medical treatments, such as ovulation induction, intrauterine insemination and in vitro fertilisation.

She said the choice of treatment depends on the underlying cause of infertility, the woman’s age, overall health status and the fertility level of both partners.

With proper guidance and monitoring by fertility specialists, these modern treatments not only improve the chances of pregnancy but can also be carried out safely and effectively according to individual needs.

Dr Raihana also advised women to avoid prolonged stress as it can disrupt hormonal balance in the body and, in turn, affect ovulation and the menstrual cycle.

In some cases, stress can also lead to extreme fatigue, sleep disturbances and emotional instability, making it more difficult for pregnancy to occur.

“For women who are trying to conceive, the most important advice from specialists is not to put too much pressure on themselves. The desire to become pregnant is natural, but excessive stress and anxiety can have negative effects not only on one’s emotional well-being but also on physical health and fertility.

“Therefore, stress management should be viewed as an integral part of efforts to conceive,” she added.