



Natural Fertility Management

THE
COMPLETE GUIDE
TO
**OPTIMUM
CONCEPTION**

FRANCESCA NAISH AND JANE BENNETT



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Management

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TO
**OPTIMUM
CONCEPTION**

SINCE 1977

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AUDIO: Relaxation and Suggestions for a Healthy Conception
free from www.fertility.com.au/resources

*MyNFM web application for charting is **free from***
www.fertility.com.au/resources

WELCOME!

In this Guide you will be taken through the practical steps that will help you to achieve a natural, healthy conception, pregnancy, birth and baby.

This is achieved in two ways. The first is to ensure the optimal health of the sperm, the egg and the nurturing environment for the developing baby, through preconception health care.

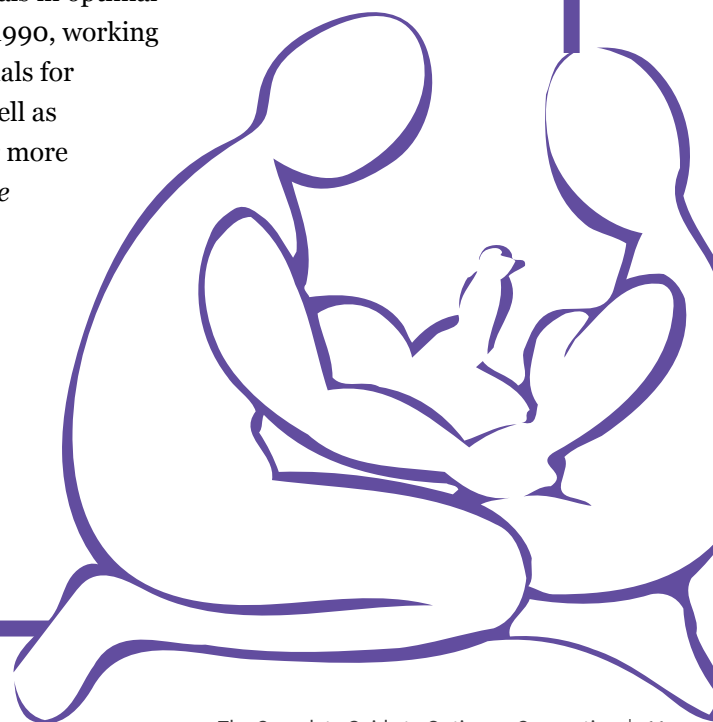
The second is to learn the Natural Fertility Management (NFM) timing techniques. These are used for:

- contraception as you prepare for your pregnancy
- becoming aware of any hormonal imbalances or other problems in your cycle which may benefit from attention or professional treatment
- timing your conception attempts
- contraception after the birth of your baby.

Even if you have a fertility problem which necessitates the use of assisted reproductive technology (IVF etc.), and which is not amenable to natural therapy, preconception health care will still give you a significant advantage in achieving a healthy conception, pregnancy, birth and baby. A recent study showed a doubling of the IVF conception rate following preconception health care. See *Module Two (M2.5) Success Rates*.

Your authors and guides through this process are Francesca Naish and Jane Bennett, who together have well over 65 years experience as pioneers in the fields of fertility awareness and preconception health care, and have trained generations of health professionals in these methods. Francesca Naish is the founder of Natural Fertility Management, and has specialised in holistic reproductive health care since 1977, assisting many tens of thousands of women and their partners achieve their fertility goals in optimal health. Jane Bennett has supported Francesca since 1990, working with her to counsel, train and produce written materials for health professionals, women and their partners, as well as developing programs for mothers and daughters. For more information about your authors go to *M6.1: About the Authors*.

We warmly welcome you to Natural Fertility Management and wish you a rewarding journey toward your parenthood goals.



How to use this Guide

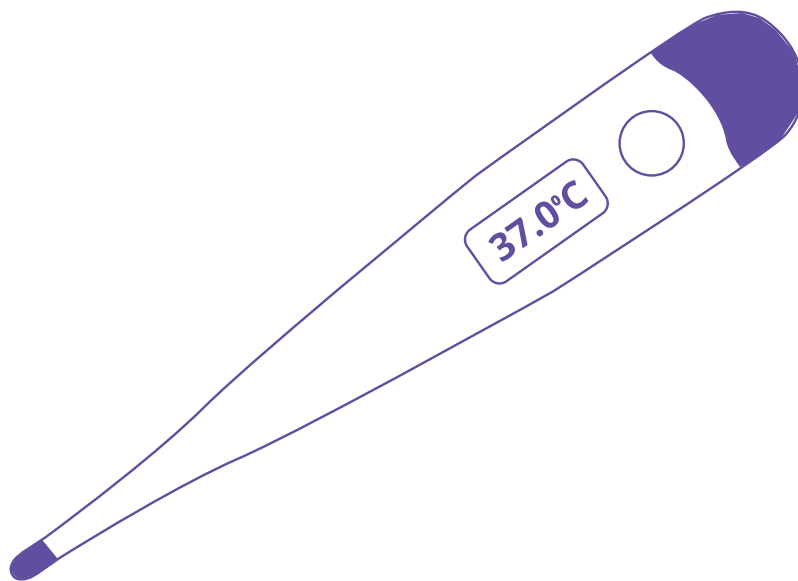
As you read through the Guide you will see where a step in the learning process involves an action on your part this is signified by an arrow symbol →. The rest of the written material is information you will need to understand the different aspects of the NFM timing techniques and preconception health care.

In the printed Guide you will have noticed tabs down the right hand side. You can use these to navigate quickly to the specific sections you want to read or to record your observations.

In the electronic Guide you can navigate from section to section via live link.

There is no need to remember everything you read for the first time. The Guide is designed so it's easy and intuitive for you to dip in to, and find the sections you need when you need them.

- **To complete your NFM Conception Guide download *Relaxation and Suggestions for a Healthy Conception* free from www.fertility.com.au/resources.**
- ***MyNFM* web application for charting is free from www.fertility.com.au/resources.**
- **You will also need a digital fertility thermometer. We recommend that you buy two, so that if the one you're using is lost or broken you can continue to take your temperature uninterrupted. It's a good idea to calibrate these, by taking your temperature with both at the beginning, so you can see if they differ. That way, if you need to swap thermometers in the middle of a cycle, you can adjust for any known difference.**



STAGE ONE: INTRODUCTION

STEP 1 INTRODUCTION TO NATURAL FERTILITY MANAGEMENT

As the first step in your introduction to Natural Fertility Management, Francesca has recorded a personal welcome and overview for you.

→ **Watch *An Introduction to Natural Fertility Management* at www.fertility.com.au**

Watching this will give you an understanding of what NFM, and specifically this Guide, offers you, before you move on to the more detailed information below. You may find it especially useful to watch this with your partner.

The NFM approach to optimum conception

The NFM methods support couples who want their child to have the healthiest start to life, and may also be of assistance for couples with fertility problems.

This approach to preconception health care and conception timing aims to optimise the chances for a very natural and healthy conception, pregnancy, birth and baby. In order to bring this about it works with the natural cycles of the body, and good general and reproductive health.

This is achieved through the use of dietary and lifestyle changes, cycle charting and timing techniques, and teaches couples how to understand and manage their own fertility in the least invasive, most effective and safest way possible.

Where there are fertility problems the aim is to address and heal the reasons behind the problem, rather than override it. This may require the support of natural therapies, and possibly the help of a natural health professional, preferably a practitioner who specialises in treatments for reproductive health and fertility.

In some cases, orthodox medicine may also be required to complement the natural therapy approach.

The first aim of NFM is always a natural conception, although it is also used by couples to support the effectiveness of assisted reproductive technologies, such as IVF. For more on all aspects of infertility see *M2.2: Fertility Problems*.

A healthy body is a fertile body

The NFM approach is one of common sense. The idea is simply to bring prospective parents back to optimal general and reproductive health *before* conception occurs. This involves preconception health care for a minimum of four months, for both parents, followed by nutritional and lifestyle support for the pregnant and breastfeeding mother.

Parenting starts before conception

We recognise that the journey into parenting is undoubtedly one of life's most profound and intimate experiences. Parenting starts even before conception takes place. Everything you learn while practicing preconception health care will be of ongoing benefit for you, your babies and for your future family life.

Charting the menstrual cycle

Through learning to recognise the unmistakable signs of fertility that recur with each menstrual cycle and through charting them, you will become aware of patterns of change in cervical mucus, body-at-rest temperature and other signs and symptoms. This information will enable you to avoid conception until you have completed your preparation, and learn how to optimise the timing of conception to help fresh sperm and a fresh egg come together at the optimal time in the menstrual cycle. The same charts will enable a more thorough understanding of your reproductive health and hormonal and nutritional status. A natural health practitioner familiar with reproductive health and fertility issues can offer you further guidance if required.

What's involved in the NFM approach to optimum conception?

A healthy lifestyle:

- avoidance of, and protection against, environmental toxins, such as chemicals, heavy metals and radiation
- avoidance of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and social drugs
- regular exercise
- stress reduction.

Good nutrition:

- organic, fresh food
- purified water
- good dietary balance of protein and carbohydrate
- avoidance of refined grains, sugar, trans-fats and some dairy products
- a comprehensive and balanced regime of nutritional supplements.

Relaxation and stress management:

- for motivation and confidence
- for emotional issues surrounding pregnancy, parenting and fertility problems
- for support in reducing addictive or unhealthy habits.

Charting and timing techniques:

- natural contraception during the preconception months to avoid problems associated with all forms of synthetic hormones (pills and inserts etc.)
- ongoing charting of cyclical signs and symptoms, including mucus and basal temperature, to assist in recognising hormonal and nutritional imbalances
- conception timing techniques to ensure fresh, healthy sperm and eggs meeting at the optimal time in the menstrual cycle.

STEP 2 WHY PRECONCEPTION HEALTH CARE?

Preconception health care practiced by *both* parents for four months before conception, to ensure healthy generation of sperm and maturation of eggs, gives you the best possible chance of having a healthy conception, pregnancy, birth and baby. Even if you are impatient to conceive, are older prospective parents or have been experiencing problems, the rewards these months of preparation can offer you, your pregnancy and your baby are well worth your patience and commitment.

You will also be learning the NFM timing techniques over the next few months in preparation for your conception attempts.

The importance of preconception health care

Put very simply, preconception health care involves making sure, as much as is possible, that there is an adequate supply of everything which is essential to the health of your eggs and sperm, to your fertility and to your baby's development, and an absence of everything which has been shown to be harmful. Ideally, both parents need to enjoy optimum general and reproductive health for a period of at least four months immediately preceding the conception of their baby.

Not a new idea – just common sense

The practice of preconception health care has been used for thousands of years, and is enjoying a resurgence now due to increasing problems with fertility, pregnancy, birth and infant health.

The ancient Spartans knew of preconception health benefits more than 2,500 years ago with young women engaging in wrestling, running and throwing the quoit in order for pregnancies to be healthy and strong. Later the ancient Romans recognised environmental effects on fertility when they noticed the reduced conception rate following their installation of lead water pipes. The physicians of ancient Greece recommended that young women take no alcohol in preparation for conception and during pregnancy. Many traditional societies today still feed special diets to their young women and men of childbearing age. Veterinarians, stockbreeders and farmers routinely use preconception health care for their animals as a means of improving reproductive outcomes. *So why not us?*

Preconception health care is simply a common sense way for both prospective parents to improve their fertility and the health of their eggs and sperm, by optimising:

- the presence of the nutritional ‘building blocks’ which are necessary for healthy male and female fertility and the formation of a healthy embryo
- the absence of toxins that could be detrimental to this process
- good general and reproductive health in both parents.

Your growing baby rapidly develops new organs and body tissues, and needs nutrients to complete this growth and development in health and vitality. The food you eat and the supplements you take before and during pregnancy act as a supply of nutrition for these developing organs and tissues.

Why four months of preconception health care?

The reason preconception health care takes a minimum of four months is to ensure that the health of your sperm and eggs is optimal before conception. Sperm can take up to 116 days to generate and during this time they are susceptible to damage from illness, toxins (pollutants and drugs such as cigarettes, caffeine and alcohol) and nutritional deficiencies. Similarly, the egg is vulnerable during the maturation phase, for approximately 100 days leading up to ovulation. Therefore, having at least four months of healthy living *before* conception will improve the quality of your eggs and sperm, and optimise the health of your pregnancy, birth and child.

Fathers too! The important role of prospective fathers

A father’s involvement in preconception health care is just as important as the mother’s. Fathers, after all, are responsible for contributing at least 50% of the essential building blocks that result in a healthy conception.

Sperm are more vulnerable than eggs to toxic exposure and nutritional deficiency. Unlike eggs, which are safely cocooned within the mother’s body and are only vulnerable during maturation, sperm are generated wholly during the preconception period, and are therefore fully exposed to any physiological or environmental hazards present at that time. Sperm are also smaller than eggs and are held outside the body, increasing their susceptibility.

Many men are unaware of how critical their contribution is. They don’t have the monthly reminders of their fertility that women experience, and are generally not educated about the importance of their role.

It’s easy to feel that the mother, who provides two of the three factors of conception and gestation (egg, sperm and nurturing environment, including the womb) is largely responsible for the health of the pregnancy and baby. But just as

we now understand that both partners are responsible for successful fertility, it's becoming quite clear that the preconception health of the father can have a significant effect, and in some instances may be even more important than that of the mother.

Recent research is confirming that for some health and viability concerns of pregnancy, embryonic / foetal development and the future health of the child, responsibility may indeed lie primarily with the father. This is especially true if the father is approaching, in, or beyond, his forties.

'Older' parents

You may not realise this applies to you, as your general health and vitality may still be vibrant and life's journey may not even be half way through, but as either parent approaches the end of their thirties, or even the start of their forties, their fertility will be declining and, perhaps even more importantly, the risks to the health of the pregnancy and the growing baby will be increasing.

A woman's fertility may decline quite rapidly as she approaches, or enters, her forties, and while a man's fertility declines less suddenly, paternal age can have significant effect on the health of the pregnancy and developing embryo.

Despite quite reasonable advice to 'older' women that they shouldn't delay their conception attempts, it's actually even more important for these prospective parents and their partners to give themselves enough time to be thorough with their preconception health care. There is overwhelming evidence that this can very significantly reduce the risks of miscarriage, congenital defect and other health concerns which are more prevalent in the children of 'older' parents.

After conception

There is growing evidence that the first few days, even hours, of the embryo's life are critically important. In the first trimester (three months) the embryonic /foetal mass increases over 2,500,000 times; a phenomenal rate of growth that has exceptional nutritional requirements. In the second and third trimesters combined, the mass increases (only!) 230 times. Also, in the first trimester, vital events such as cell differentiation and organisation, and organogenesis (the making of the organs) take place.

After this time, your baby is basically formed, including any anomalies, though there will still be important influences on its further growth and development as the pregnancy continues. Most prospective mothers are aware of the importance of folate (folic acid), which is an essential factor on days 27 or 28 of the pregnancy when the neural tubes close. Its absence could have serious consequences, and the baby could suffer from a neural tube defect, such as spina bifida.

Folate is important for many other events in your baby's development and is not the only nutrient required for neural tube closure. In fact *all essential nutrients* have a vital role to play in a predetermined sequence of events that proceeds, regardless of whether these building blocks are present in adequate supply or not. Nutrient X needs to be present on day Y for process Z to proceed satisfactorily. If it isn't, then that process may not have an optimal outcome.

You can only be really confident that your pregnancy and baby will be as healthy as possible if you have prepared well for several months before conception takes place.

Luckily the human body is generally robust and most pregnancies and babies are without major problems. However, with a little care before and during pregnancy, you can feel confident that you have every chance of achieving the successful pregnancy and healthy baby that every prospective parent longs for.

Your very healthy baby ... and beyond

Preconception health care for *both* parents, followed by pregnancy health care for the mother, can not only reduce the incidence of infertility, miscarriage, malformation and perinatal death, but also that of those chronic and debilitating childhood health problems which are, unfortunately, so common these days, such as asthma, allergy, learning and behaviour problems.

In fact recent research shows that these benefits then extend into adulthood, with reduced risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and other degenerative diseases.

No one wants to spend those precious first years of their child's life dealing with colic, chronic upper respiratory and middle-ear infections, eating disorders and wakeful nights. No one wants their child to go through school unable to take advantage of their learning opportunities, or grow into an adult with a lowered immune system and greater risk of degenerative disease. Your child deserves the best possible start in life – and this is his or her natural birthright.

A little planning, and you can not only *minimise* the risks of fertility and foetal health problems, *but also maximise* the chances of your children being well-formed, beautiful, intelligent and emotionally well-balanced, and of your experience of pregnancy and parenthood being one of confidence and joy.

Epigenetics

In the instant that the sperm and egg combine, a genetic blueprint is formed for the future development of your baby. Clearly, the health of the egg and the sperm is of crucial importance.

However, we now know that the expression of a gene can be turned on and off, and that this

can be triggered by nutritional, toxic and other environmental and lifestyle influences. This means that, despite inheriting a certain genetic defect, good preconception and pregnancy health care, with adequate attention to nutrition and avoidance of toxic exposure, can prevent the expression of many of the possible mutations or health problems that could otherwise occur.

Recent findings in the exciting field of epigenetics show that these benefits are heritable. This means that you may be affected by the nutritional and lifestyle choices of your parents, which is all the more reason to put in place preventive measures. However, it also means that what you do may benefit not only your children, but also your grandchildren and even your great-grandchildren. These far-reaching benefits for future generations are of inestimable value not only for your new baby, but for the future health of all your descendants.

Let's review the benefits of this approach

Benefits for prospective parents:

- increased chance of a healthy conception, pregnancy, birth and baby
- gentle, natural and safe – does not threaten your health
- an empowering experience of understanding and managing your own fertility
- improved general health
- appropriate for all couples planning a family
- equal involvement for each partner
- helpful for older parents or those with fertility concerns
- a valuable complement to assisted reproductive technology
- learn safe, natural contraception for after the birth of your baby.

Benefits for your pregnancy and birth:

- increased chance of a healthy, uncomplicated pregnancy
- decreased occurrence of common pregnancy complaints, such as morning sickness
- decreased chance of miscarriage, premature birth or stillbirth
- may help prevent more serious problems, such as gestational diabetes, hypertension, pre-eclampsia
- increased chance of a natural, un-medicated birth
- decreased risk of post-natal depression.

Benefits for your baby and child:

- increased chance of a healthy, happy baby
- reduced risk of congenital malformations
- increased chance of problem-free breastfeeding and close bonding
- less likely to suffer from various health and learning problems in childhood and as an adult
- health benefits for all future generations
- healthy lifestyle, nutrition and dietary habits for your growing family.

Benefits if assisted reproductive technology is required:

- good preconception health care for both parents has been found to significantly improve your chances of success with IVF
- helps avoid the increased miscarriage and health risks to mother and infant that may occur with IVF.

To understand more about preconception health care:

- ➔ **read *M1.1: Preconception Health Care (and other important modules referred to there)***
- ➔ **read *M2.5: Success Rates for studies showing the results of these methods for fertility and health issues***
- ➔ **discuss with each other which aspects of preconception health care are particularly important for you and how you will manage the overall preparation for your pregnancy. To help you do this you can use the *M4: Preconception Checklist and Diet and Lifestyle Questionnaire*.**
- ➔ **If you would like professional help see *M6.2: Services Offered at the Jocelyn Centre*.**

To understand more about natural ways to overcome male and female fertility problems, and prevent miscarriage:

- ➔ **read *M2: Irregular Cycles, Fertility Problems and Miscarriage*.**
- ➔ **see *The Natural Way to Better Babies* by **Francesca Naish and Janette Roberts** for more detailed information. This book may be ordered from www.fertility.com.au.**

As you chart your cycle over the next few months, you will be gaining valuable information about your reproductive health and learning the techniques that will enable you to optimise your chances of conception through good timing.

If you are unable to achieve a natural conception, and need to resort to assisted reproductive technology, preconception health care will still significantly improve your chances of a healthy conception. Even if you have no need for contraception over the next few months, charting your cycle, as described in the next section, Preparing for Conception, will give you helpful information about your reproductive health.



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