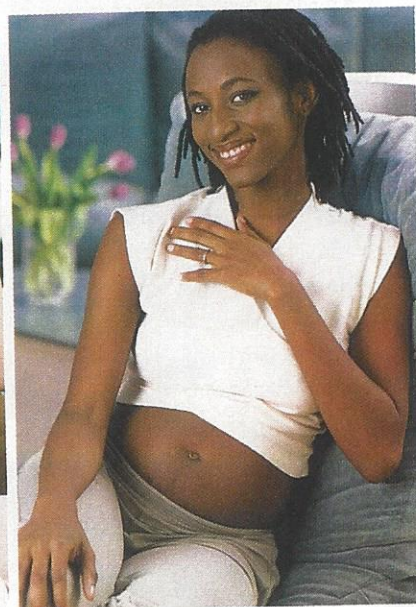


Is There a Perfect Age to Have a Baby?

The pros and cons of having kids in your 20s, 30s, and 40s **By Jessica Brown**



When Stacey Fellner became ready to start a family at age 33, she was as worried as she was excited. Initially, she and her husband, Jon, weren't even sure they wanted kids. "But when the time finally felt right, I couldn't seem to conceive," says the Chevy Chase, Maryland, mother of two, now 41. "I was so stressed! I couldn't help but wonder whether motherhood in my 30s was a bad idea." Though her ob-gyn tested her for abnormalities, everything was fine. "My doctor reassured me that not getting pregnant right away was typical at my age. Hearing those words made me relax instantly." She got pregnant two weeks later—before all the test results even came back.

Fellner's story is easy to relate to—what woman hasn't sweated over the right time to have a baby? We've all heard stories about the health risks of delaying pregnancy or wondered if we'd even feel energized enough at 40 to han-

dle pregnancy—or, on the flip side, settled and mature enough in our 20s. Add in old-fashioned societal pressure, and it's no surprise that we're anxious. But how much does age matter for your health and your baby's? "It does have an impact, but the differences aren't anything to prevent you from trying to get pregnant whenever it feels right for you," says Richard Schwarz, MD, obstetrical consultant for the March of Dimes and vice chairman for clinical services in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Maimonides Medical Center, in Brooklyn, New York. "And the problems that could arise can be managed with good prenatal care and counseling."

So what can you realistically expect? We asked experts and moms of all ages to take us on a decade-by-decade tour of pregnancy—and put your mind at ease!

Your age can have an impact, but don't let it prevent you from doing whatever is right for you.

Starting Early: Your 20s

These peak childbearing years are still the most popular time to have a baby, though the average age is inching up. In 1970, American women typically had their first child at 21—today, most of us are just shy of 25 on the big day. And as you've likely heard, the younger you are, the smoother your pregnancy will be. "Because your eggs are young and more likely to be healthy, it's generally easy to conceive now," says Jennifer R. Niebyl, MD, professor and head of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinic, in Iowa City. High-quality eggs

also translate into a lower risk of birth defects; at 25, the likelihood of having a baby with Down syndrome is about 1 in 1,250. The chances that you'll miscarry are also minimal, since carrying a fetus with Down syn-