

drome or another chromosomal disorder is often the reason women lose a pregnancy, notes Dr. Niebyl.

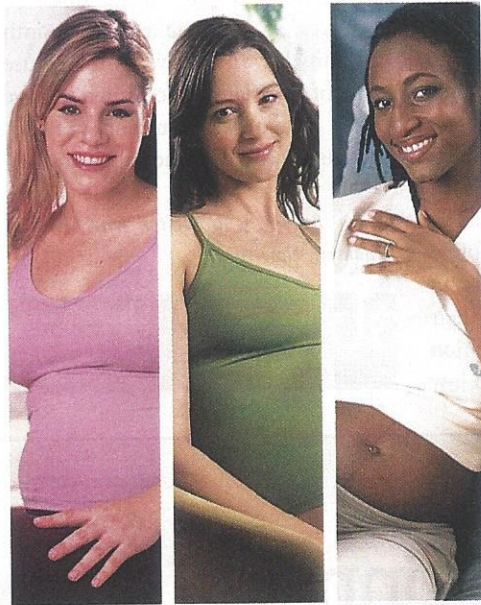
Like many women who conceive for the first time in their 20s, Cassie Lyons, 24, of Chattanooga, Tennessee, knows she has it pretty easy. Currently in her seventh month of pregnancy, Lyons admits she's felt more tired recently but hasn't had to adjust her life beyond going to bed earlier. "I started a family now because I'd like to have two or

"societal norms have outpaced evolutionary ones. Younger bodies are better able to handle the physical demands of pregnancy, but you may not feel financially or psychologically prepared to be a parent at that stage," he says.

The Middle Years: Your 30s

If you opted to put off pregnancy until your 30s, you're in good company: According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the birth rates for women ages 35 to 39 doubled between 1978 and 2000.

Ella Moore, 32, of Austin, Texas, planned her first pregnancy in her 30s because she wanted to establish her career first. Though her husband was ready to start a family earlier, Moore had a job that she en-



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joyed, which required long hours and frequent travel. "Holding off to have a baby enabled me to move ahead professionally."

In fact, there's not much to fret about when you're expecting in your early 30s. "It's much like being pregnant in your 20s—your health, energy, and fertility are still all at optimal levels," says Dr. Schwarz. Plus, the quality of your eggs is still very good, making the risks of genetic defects low.

Mollie McQuarrie, of Brooklyn, New York, waited until she was 34 to conceive so she could complete graduate school first. "It did take a while to get pregnant—a little over a year—and I had a miscarriage," she says. Unfortunately, the risk of losing a pregnancy is higher now: By ages 35 to 39, the odds hover at about 20 percent due to declining egg quality. However, McQuarrie was successful the second time and is now in her seventh month. "I'm happy having a child now," she says. "I'm more confident in who I am, so I have more to offer as a parent."

The progression of your 30s can also bring other changes. "Once you turn 35, your pregnancy will be monitored more closely," says Dr. Schwarz. One reason for that: The risk of birth defects rises at 35—the odds your baby will have Down syndrome is now 1 in 400—so expect your doctor to offer you an amniocentesis and/or other screening tests to check for it and other chromosomal abnormalities. One option is chorionic villus sampling (CVS), in which a catheter is inserted into the placenta to suction out a tissue sample; if everything is clear, you can skip having an amnio.

"Some women may also be offered a nuchal fold translucency, but the procedure is still being studied," notes Dr. Goldstein. This less-invasive test measures the back of the fetus's neck during an ultrasound scan; a thick nuchal fold

can indicate an increased risk of chromosomal problems. It's less accurate than CVS, so a positive result will need to be confirmed by an amnio. Still, none of this is a cue to go into panic mode: About 95 percent of women who undergo prenatal testing receive good news. Even the cutoff number of 35 is arbitrary. "Your genetic risks are naturally increasing as you age," says Dr. Schwarz. "Thirty-five is simply the age experts agree that these tests should be offered."

The Mature Mom: Your 40s

The experts won't lie: Having a baby now can be exhausting. "I make the analogy to my patients that there's a reason why football players don't compete after age 40—you don't have a physical advantage and energy reserve anymore!" jokes Dr. Niebyl. Jessica Kasten, who had her first child at 41, can relate: "I was so tired that I regretted choosing an ob-gyn who was 25 minutes away from me." Chris Roll, who had twin girls when she was in her late 40s, recalls wanting to

three kids by my mid-30s, but I didn't want to cram them in," she says. Steven Goldstein, MD, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at New York University Medical Center, adds that women Lyons's age are also more likely to have a smoother time recovering from birth. "The older you are, the harder it is to bounce back," he says.

Age may also affect your delivery experience. According to a recent March of Dimes study, 80 percent of women in their 20s give birth vaginally, compared with 40 percent of women in their 30s and 43 percent in their 40s. "Vaginal deliveries are more common in younger women because their bodies have more muscle tone in the uterus and abs. This makes pushing easier," says Dr. Schwarz.

In fact, the only con Dr. Goldstein cites for twentysomething moms is that