

CONCEPTION POSITIONS

FACT OR FALLACY? *By Jennifer Nelson*

If all you want for Christmas is to get pregnant, you're probably spending plenty of time in the bedroom. But what about all the conception stories that involve strange positions and awkward angles? Are they old wives' tales, or do they really work?

Once a couple decides they're ready for a baby, they usually want pregnancy to happen right away. When it takes months or even years for them to conceive, they can become frustrated, heartbroken and desperate. Many couples struggling with infertility are willing to do almost anything to get pregnant, so adding a new position to their love-making doesn't seem all that crazy. But are any positions for intercourse more conducive to conceiving?

"No," says Jay Schinfeld, MD, director of the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility at Abington Memorial Hospital and associate professor at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. For women with normal anatomy, changing sexual positions won't increase their likelihood of getting pregnant. "The advice you give to one person might help, [while] the advice you give to another won't, and most advice probably isn't necessary at all," says Schinfeld.

Falsehoods, like the missionary position being best suited to conception, really have no medical merit, says

Schinfeld. Likewise, a couple making love in an upright position, such as sitting or standing, won't risk the chance of gravity ruining their best laid plans for offspring. The normal volume of seminal fluid is two to five cubic centimeters. The actual amount of sperm, however, is only 0.1 cc. This small amount of sperm makes its way to the uterus quickly (within five to ten minutes), so there's no reason to try to contain the rest of the fluid by avoiding upright positions.

"It's the second-oldest [conception] wives' tale," says Randy Morris, MD, associate clinical professor for the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology at the University of Illinois School of Medicine. "There is a fair amount of seminal fluid that escapes from the vagina, and that has led some people to believe that if you are in a standing position or upright, you're going to promote the loss of seminal fluid." Some people believe that if they lie down, put a pillow under their bottom or raise their legs in the air after intercourse, they can somehow keep more of the sperm in. "But again, there's never been any

validation that that's the case," says Morris. "We would have been made fairly inefficiently to have to have intercourse in a certain way just to get pregnant."

Myths and Misconceptions

It's easy to see how advice is passed from one couple to another on positions that seem to work. When Edwina Lewis of Houston, TX was trying to conceive her now grown daughter, her gynecologist told her to use the "doggie" position and stay with her hips elevated a little while afterward. "It worked and I became pregnant on the first try," says Lewis. Her daughter, Heather Northam, also of Houston, is now 31 and trying to conceive herself. Lewis says, "I passed on that advice. I thought if it worked the first time for us, it must be good advice." However, Northam hasn't been so lucky. After trying unsuccessfully for several months, she says, "I'm willing to try just about anything at this point, but it's really up to God in the end."

Stories of which positions work best are endless and varied. "I had

read that lying on my side after [intercourse] would help the sperm reach the eggs much better,” says Lori San Martin of West Hill, CA. “And in my case, they did – both eggs! I ended up with twins.”

“My brother in-law and his wife always lived in third world countries as expatriates,” says Peggy Vincent, author of *Baby Catcher: Chronicles of a Modern Midwife*. A doctor in Oman suggested an inverted position after intercourse. “They went camping alone...made love on a deserted beach, and afterwards he lifted her legs until she was standing on her head,” says Vincent. “They got the giggles, but he held her up for ten minutes.” The couple conceived their first daughter. It’s no wonder, then, that when it came time to try for another baby, the couple repeated the procedure...this time with a herd of camels watching nearby.

Although some positions seem to work for some couples, according to science, the most important thing to know (besides a woman’s anatomy!) is that sperm can only live in the vagina for ten to fifteen minutes. It usually only takes five minutes for the sperm to make its way to the fallopian tube. “If you do certain things like lie still in bed for an hour after you have sex, you’re not increasing your chances of getting pregnant,” says Schinfeld. “You’re increasing your chances of a bladder infection.”

Pillows, Prop and Wedges – Oh, My!

Ever run across the ads on late night infomercials for pillows that lift your hips in the air during or after intercourse? Although they may sound like fun, there’s never been any data to support them scientifically. Says Schinfeld, “I’d rather see people spend money on good wine and nice perfume or a teddy.”

Adding these pillows as a new bedroom prop can make sex more fun for couples, especially those who are

getting caught up in the science of ovulation tracking and need to be reminded about the excitement and romance of creating a life together. They can also help many women reach orgasm more quickly, which just might add incentive for even more frequent trips to the bedroom; there’s just no medical evidence to support the claims of the pillows causing conception.

“If it’s going to happen, it usually will,” says Stephanie Devane-Johnson, CNM, MSN, a midwife at Triangle Ob/Gyn in Cary, NC. “For those it isn’t happening for, it may be something medical, some type of fertility issue that needs to be addressed.”

Schinfeld recommends that by about the age of 35, you should probably head straight to an infertility specialist, because your chances for conceiving are lower by this age. A period of unsuccessful attempts can be psychologically damaging, too, which is another reason to see a specialist fairly soon.

You also need to relax and try to keep from agonizing over why you’re not getting pregnant. According to Schinfeld, “If you’re a rabbit having sex, there’s a ninety percent chance of [getting] a bunny. But the chance per month for a 27-year-old woman at the peak of her fertility is around eight percent. The focus should be on frequency [of intercourse] and trying to make enjoyable sexual experiences.”

When Certain Positions Can Help

About twenty percent of women have a tipped uterus, which means the uterus is aimed forward toward the abdomen. Women who have a tipped uterus can use specific sexual positions to help boost their odds of pregnancy success. Unfortunately, most women won’t know they have a tipped uterus unless their physician recognizes it during a gynecological examination. Make sure to let your care provider know you’re trying to conceive, and ask if he knows of any problems

specific to your body that might prevent you from getting pregnant.

Women with a tipped uterus have some choices. “Number one is to make love face to face, then [have the women] roll over on her belly for ten to fifteen minutes,” says Schinfeld. “That rotates the cervix, which [was positioned] very high and away from the [sperm], and... turns it around, so the cervix [is] sitting in the [seminal fluid].”

The other option is to use the “doggy” position (woman on all fours, man behind). “These are the only [positions] shown to improve fertility if you have a tipped uterus,” says Schinfeld.

If you’re a woman with a tipped uterus and you’ve used pillows and other position devices under your bottom, you may actually be decreasing your odds of conception. Putting your body in this position pulls your uterus away from the seminal fluid deposited at the bottom of the vagina.

So as you and your partner work on creating a life together, remember to concentrate more on romance and sound medical advice than on positions and products. If you’re over 35, don’t waste time on old wives’ tales; go see your doctor. For women under 35, don’t panic if you don’t immediately get pregnant once you start trying. Infertility for women under 35 isn’t diagnosed until after one year of unsuccessful attempts. Meanwhile, learn how to determine and track your ovulation cycles so you know if they’re regular, ask your healthcare provider about the position of your uterus and concentrate on the love-making frequency. The holiday season is an especially romantic time that should give you ample opportunities for baby-making moments. If you’re lucky, you might just end up with the most exciting Christmas present of your lives!

About the author: Jennifer Nelson is a Florida-based writer and mother of two.