

Fish Oil and Fertility: A Surprising Connection

Dr. Barry Sears

[Zone Living](#)

[CBN.com](#) – One question I am often asked is, “Does the Zone Diet work the same for women as it does for men?” After all, the Zone Diet is based on controlling your hormone levels—which leads to a second question which is, “Aren’t men and women supposed to be hormonally different?” Actually, the answers are yes and yes. Yes, both men and women can reach the Zone through my dietary plan. And yes, both sexes are hormonally different.

From a hormonal standpoint, women are far more complex creatures. (My wife would argue that women are more complex from an emotional and intellectual standpoint as well.) A woman’s hormones must speak a more complex language that prepares her body for pregnancy, deals with the complexities of pregnancy, and ushers her body through menopause. Women’s hormonal fluctuations are much more complex than men’s. That’s why I think women understand the power of hormones to a far greater extent than men do. Yes, women get the same hormonal-based health problems as men, like heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and depression, all of which can be mitigated by my dietary program. They also have an expanded list of health conditions and problems, like premenstrual syndrome, menopause, osteoporosis and breast cancer that can be addressed by the same dietary technology with a few small adjustments.

An adult female’s unique hormonal life can be divided into three distinct time periods: pre-menopause (menstruation and pregnancy), menopause, and post-menopause. Let’s see how my dietary program can help alleviate conditions that may occur through the pre-menopause phase of her life.

Pre-menopause

Pregnancy & Infertility

During the 1960s, many pre-menopausal women would have identified their main health concern as “not becoming pregnant”. Now, as women choose to delay their pregnancies, they face a growing problem of how to become pregnant. Women who wait until they are over 30 to become pregnant increase their risk of infertility. I also believe that a dietary component may be involved. Americans are eating far more carbohydrates today compared to the 1960s, and this has caused a dramatic surge in our insulin levels. Another clue to increased female infertility may involve an imbalance in eicosanoids since research has indicated that low-dose aspirin significantly improves the success rates in women undergoing in-vitro fertilization. This would suggest that my dietary recommendations might provide a unique intervention to improve fertility. Let me discuss why.

A primary cause of female infertility is polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). This condition is linked to increased insulin levels. In women with PCOS, the ovaries release an egg from a follicle sporadically, if at all, instead of the usual every 28 days. These irregular cycles can be corrected once women with PCOS lower their elevated insulin levels. At this point their fertility almost magically reappears. Unfortunately, even after women with PCOS become pregnant, they still have higher rates of miscarriages. Thus, simply reducing insulin levels alone is not the total answer. The other important factor appears to be an imbalance of eicosanoids that can be treated with the increased consumption of fish oil. Epidemiological studies of pregnant women who consume large amounts of long-chain Omega-3 fatty acids, like EPA and DHA, found in fish oil tend to carry their babies for a longer period of time. They also have a correspondingly lower rate of premature births which can cause physical and neurological problems such as learning disabilities. Since 6 to 10 percent of all births in America are premature, I feel it is quite likely this unfortunate statistic may be linked to our growing decrease of long-chain Omega-3 fatty acids containing EPA/DHA in the diet.

Even if you don't suffer from infertility, high-dose fish oil is the most important supplement you can take during pregnancy for several reasons, but most importantly for the development of the child's brain. Long-chain Omega-3 fatty acids are critical for fetal brain development to provide your child the best possible mental advantage coming into this world. The fetus' need for DHA is greatest in the last trimester of the pregnancy as fetal brain cells are being created at a prodigious rate (more than 250,000 nerve cells per minute). If you don't have adequate supplies of DHA in your body, your fetus' brain is going to have trouble keeping up with the growing demand for DHA building blocks. Thus, pregnancy is a critical time to take fish oil supplements.

Fish oil can also help pregnant women avoid two serious conditions that can occur during pregnancy: pregnancy-induced hypertension (pre-eclampsia) and gestational diabetes. Both of these conditions can be treated either by lowering insulin levels (gestational diabetes) or by decreasing the levels of "bad" [eicosanoids](#) (pre-eclampsia). To accomplish the first goal, pregnant women need to consume an optimal ratio of carbohydrates to protein. To accomplish the second, they need to take ultra – refined EPA / DHA fish oil concentrate supplements.

Thus, the best diet to accomplish both goals and also provide adequate levels of DHA is one following my dietary recommendations. If you are pregnant you should be consuming extra calories beyond a typical woman's nutritional needs—on the order of about 300 calories more a day. This simply means using a slightly larger plate at each meal, but still keeping the correct balance of foods. (Alternatively, you can consume an extra two or three glasses of low-fat milk every day, since milk has the appropriate balance of carbohydrates to protein.) Following my dietary plan during pregnancy will ensure adequate protein for both you and your fetus, and the increased consumption of fruits and vegetables will supply the necessary micronutrients for both. It's never too late in your pregnancy to go on my dietary program—because your fetus actually gets the biggest benefits during the last trimester.

After giving birth, new mothers should keep supplementing their diet with high-dose fish oil to lower their risk of getting post-partum depression. After birth, the levels of long-chain Omega-3 fatty acids (especially DHA) drop dramatically in the mother's blood. This is similar to the decreased levels of long-chain Omega-3 fatty acids that are observed in depressed patients. By supplementing her diet with adequate levels of high-dose fish oil, a new mother can avoid that drop in long-chain Omega-3 fatty acids, and thus will likely avoid any resulting depression. Supplementation with ultra - refined EPA / DHA fish oil concentrate is also important for the mother who is breast feeding her child to maintain the DHA levels in her breast milk that are crucial for the development of a young baby's still rapidly growing brain.

(For more information on this subject read Dr. Sears book *The OmegaRx Zone* and always consult with your physician prior to any dietary changes.)

Editor's Note: Watch for part two of this series in which Dr. Barry Sears will be discussing menopause and post-menopause.

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Dr. Barry Sears is a leader in the field of dietary control of hormonal response. A former research scientist at the Boston University School of Medicine and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dr. Sears has dedicated his efforts over the past 25 years to the study of lipids and their inflammatory role in the development of chronic disease.

He holds 13 U.S. patents in the areas of intravenous drug delivery systems and hormonal regulation for the treatment of cardiovascular disease.