

HANDOUT

JOURNEY OF THE SPERM AND THE EGG

Here's the story of how pregnancy happens... the journey of the sperm and the egg. Women are born with all of their eggs. Once a month, an egg is released from the ovary. Usually, only one ovary releases an egg. This process is called ovulation. Women ovulate (release an egg) approximately 14 days before the next period. In general, a woman is most fertile (most likely to get pregnant if she has sex without using birth control) at about the halfway point between two periods. Once an egg is released, it travels into the Fallopian tube. The uterus prepares for the possibility of a pregnancy by building up a thick, nutrient-rich lining which can nurture the fertilized egg.

Unlike women, men's testicles are constantly producing sperm. It takes a few months for sperm cells to develop and mature and be ready to fertilize an egg. Since the testicles produce sperm all the time, there is always mature sperm around (in the testicles, epididymis, and vas deferens).

Every time a man and woman have sexual intercourse, unless he is using a condom or withdraws his penis in time, millions of sperm are ejaculated into the vagina...anywhere between 200 to 600 million sperm! Those millions of sperm then begin their journey to find an egg. Sperm are tiny, microscopic cells but they are great swimmers. They also mix with fluids from the prostate gland and seminal vesicles, which helps keep them strong and makes it easier for them to swim. The mixture of sperm and fluids is called semen. Once they are deposited in the vagina, they swim up to the mouth of the uterus which is called the cervix. The sperm then move on into the uterus where they must continue swimming to reach the fallopian tubes.

If the woman has released an egg, the sperm that have made it to the correct fallopian tube will work hard to fertilize the egg. The sperm swim through the cervix all the way to the other end of the womb to finally reach the fallopian tube. If the sperm is lucky, the woman has just ovulated and the egg is on the way. If not, the sperm will wait around for ovulation, or for the egg to drop. Sperm can survive in the womb for 3-5 days.

Note: This does not mean that fertilization will always happen, even if a man and woman have unprotected intercourse during her most fertile time (which is during ovulation—around the halfway point between her periods). Some women think they are infertile if they don't get pregnant even though they aren't using birth control for a period of time. This is not the case. It's just the luck of the draw... a pregnancy could happen the next time she has sex without birth control, or the time after.

Think of it this way: If 100 couples have intercourse on a regular basis for a year without using contraception, 90 of those couples will experience a pregnancy!

It takes just one single sperm to fertilize an egg. Once the egg is fertilized, the cells multiply and develop quickly. The fertilized egg (now called a blastocyst) moves toward and hovers in the uterus or womb, until it is ready to "implant" into that thick, nutrient-rich lining of the womb. When the fertilized egg implants, the woman is pregnant.

If the egg does not get fertilized, the lining of the uterus is not needed and it is discharged from the woman's vagina in the form of her monthly period.