

50 things you really
need to know

FANTASTIC FIRST-TIME FATHER



Tim Mungeam

Fantastic First Time Father: 50 Things You Really Need To Know

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Quercus

New York • London

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e-ISBN 978-1-62365-496-2

Distributed in the United States and Canada by Random House Publisher Services
c/o Random House, 1745 Broadway
New York, NY 10019

www.quercus.com

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NOTE TO THE READER

This book and its contents are not intended as a substitute for personal medical advice. While the advice and information in this book is believed to be accurate and true at the time of going to press, neither the authors nor the publishers can accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made.

Introduction

On the whole, men aren't huge readers of parenting books, but however you arrived here, I'm glad you did. Even though you may not have actually made the purchase, the fact that you're reading this now means a lot. It means you're ready to get stuck into being a great dad.



From day one, my intention in writing this book was to put together a practical, issues-focused companion to early fatherhood, which also looked at the personal, emotional adjustment that every man needs to make as he gets to grips with becoming a dad. It doesn't need to be read in order, so please feel free to dip in and out. As you do, I hope that you'll soon find yourself moving beyond the (all important) 'which wet wipe is better?' question and find yourself thinking about your whole approach to the messy but wonderful world that is fatherhood. Becoming a brand new, first-time dad is an uncharted journey, but it's also a chance to make your particular mark.

The book takes the view that being a dad is more of an art than a science – finding your own interpretation of what fatherhood means for you and your son, or you and your daughter. Unfortunately there's no sure-fire way to raise a perfect and happy child. I'd love to be able to tell you that success is guaranteed but it's not. It's life's greatest adventure, but it's life's greatest experiment too. There's a lot of fun to be had but you'll need to be prepared for a few explosions and the finished product may not turn out the way you expected.

However it goes for you, never forget this: fantastic first-time fathers know that, amidst the chaos and unpredictability, the secret of really successful fatherhood is simply sticking at it.

Tim Mungeam

1 Can I do this?

Becoming a dad is the start of a thrilling journey. However, it may not feel like that when you first hear the news – shock, panic and fear are common reactions to a major adjustment, and this may be the biggest life adjustment that you'll ever be asked to undertake.

Me? A dad?

From the moment your partner, wife or girlfriend told you that she was expecting, the likelihood is that you will have found yourself battling a range of conflicting emotions: delight, fear, excitement, anxiety, confidence and insecurity. It may feel as though your every action and decision now carries new significance, with implications not only for you but for two other people. The buck stops here. In an instant, life has changed and at times the responsibility can feel overwhelming. Questions like 'Am I ready?', 'Am I mature enough?' and 'Can we afford it?' will be making regular appearances in the forefront of your mind.

All these questions are perfectly normal – beginning to ask yourself these kinds of things is an important stage in preparing yourself for fatherhood. But the truthful answer to most of them is probably 'no'. Put simply, no-one can ever be completely prepared because parenthood first time around is a journey into the unknown.

Your legacy

Becoming a dad is an incredible privilege and you'll soon realize that fatherhood is the most important job you'll ever have. Forget the dreams of businessmen and politicians – fatherhood guarantees that you'll leave a flesh-and-blood legacy: your child. If that sounds daunting, you're probably in the right place, psychologically speaking. The actor Ed Asner summed up the essence of early parenthood perfectly when he jokingly described it as 'part joy, part guerrilla warfare'. The life of a new dad is punctuated with many 'top of the world' moments but these will be accompanied by a fair share of moments where you ask yourself, 'How did I get myself into this?'. But the truth is, you only need to spend a little time in the presence of a loving father and his daughter or son to see that the rewards of fatherhood are well worth the effort.

Keep calm and carry on

The early days of discovering that you're going to be a dad can be stressful but try not to get overwhelmed. The four 'Rs' of fatherhood are handy to remember at this stage:

- Resolve to be an informed, committed, involved dad from day one, even if you're quaking in

your boots.

- ~~Relax – you can't anticipate everything, so don't even start thinking about how you can plan everything out onto an Excel spreadsheet.~~
- Reach out to your partner – she is probably just as anxious as you, even if she seems completely elated. This is a big step for both of you.
- Remember that a mixture of emotions is perfectly natural. If you have any ideas about how the 'perfect dad' wouldn't feel anything but joy, take a quick peek at page 12. Humans are complicated and so are their reactions and emotions.

Six billion plus one

It's estimated that worldwide, 252 children are born every minute. That's four brand new babies a second. You may think that you've had a hectic 24 hours, but since this time yesterday the global population has increased by a hefty 362,880 people. In the time it took you to read this paragraph, the lungs of two football teams' worth of children have taken their first breaths. It's a mind-boggling statistic.

On the other hand, the fact that a third of a million babies have been born since yesterday and a further six billion people have successfully negotiated their way into the global village already probably makes zero difference to the way you feel at the moment. Because now it's your turn: your baby, your partner's pregnancy and your journey into fatherhood. This whole child-rearing thing looks very different when it's up close and personal. But remember this: despite the alarming nature of the task, many, many other dads have done it. Look around you. If those guys can do it, you can too.



In just 24 hours, around 363,000 babies are born – that's 252 a minute

Don't try to be John Wayne

As you go through this major life-adjustment, you'll probably find yourself evaluating your goals and priorities, and this is important, because it will help you define your role as dad for yourself, rather than accepting some media or big-screen version. What are the big things that are important to you in your life? What aspects of your personality and character would you like your child to inherit? More importantly, what would you prefer they didn't? What kind of role would you like to play in this little person's life?



Wow! @Sophie's just told me we're having a baby. Delighted and excited. Need to sit down.
#responsibilitybites

Becoming a dad will force you to really examine who you are, and how you came to be that person. We're talking about examining bedrock beliefs here, so no wonder it feels alarming. While you might be tempted to put on a strong, silent front, mentally retreating to a cave and pretending nothing much is happening, this isn't the way to play it. Successful parenthood depends upon genuine communication. Many men believe that it's their job to protect their partner and, during pregnancy, this can translate into a wish not to 'bother her' with their own concerns. However, a moment's reflection shows this to be faulty thinking. Your partner needs to know that you're as involved as she is, and by talking about your thoughts and concerns, she'll realize that both of you are in this together. She'll feel more confident that you understand what she's going through. And by acknowledging your feelings, you'll find out just how normal they really are.

Condensed idea

Becoming a dad is a fantastic but life-changing experience

2 Dads are different

Evidence shows that involved, informed dads have a vital role to play in helping their sons and daughters grow up to be rounded, secure and happy individuals. Kids can't rely on mums alone.

Dads are important

Most parenting books are aimed at mums and focus on the health and wellbeing of the woman and her baby through pregnancy and birth. This seems about right, given that mums are at the sharp end of early parenthood. As someone who can just about handle a dose of 'man flu', I can't begin to imagine how I would negotiate morning sickness, let alone experience agonizing contractions and hours of labour. The flipside of this focus on maternity, however, is that we can lose sight of the crucial contribution that dads can make too.

Every dad – just like every mum – matters. Research shows that informed, open-minded and ever-ready-to-learn dads can make all the difference to how good their children feel about themselves. Children with supportive dads are, for example, better at forming friendships. They exhibit fewer behavioural problems and tend to do better at school. Evidence suggests that the influence of a loving 'get stuck in' dad from an early age reaps rewards later in life too, helping a child grow into a secure confident adult, who is better at building and retaining relationships.

Male and female brains

The importance of fathers to their children is becoming better understood. Men and women are certainly equal, but they are not identical – studies are constantly advancing our understanding of how male and female brains work, and pointing up the differences. Neuroscientists and psychologists who have studied gender and brain difference talk about 'male' and 'female' brains to emphasize two extremes of a spectrum. On the extreme 'male' end of the spectrum, the skills involved in systematizing and categorizing are exceptional, while at the 'female' extreme, the skills involved in understanding and caring for other people are paramount. However, real men and women fall somewhere along this line, with some men cultivating great emotional intelligence skills, and some women being brilliant at systems and logical compartmentalizing.



I seem to have mislaid my fatherhood instruction manual. I think it might be with the car keys (wherever they are...). #missionimpossible?

What does all this mean for parenting? One thing it means – if you tend towards the extreme male end of the spectrum – is that you probably want to skip the advice in the last chapter that suggests talking openly and honestly to your partner, and sharing your feelings. But it also means that you're likely to

be good at looking at impending parenthood in a different way to your partner.

Take a look around your local town. You'll probably notice that mums often walk with babies in a sling holding the baby's face pointing inwards, towards them, while dads favour pointing the baby's face outwards, towards the world. While your partner is thinking about your child's internal world, it's likely that you'll have more of an eye on his external world – noticing the potential harms that might befall him, and the great opportunities within his grasp.

Dad facts

The role a father plays in his children's day-to-day life has changed dramatically over the years.

- British fathers' care of infants and young children rose by 800 per cent between 1975 and 1997, from 15 minutes to two hours on an average working day.
- In the UK, dads in two-parent families do an average of 25 per cent of the childcare-related activities during the week and 30 per cent at weekends.
- The pace of change is increasing. Between 2002 and 2005, the percentage of new fathers in the UK who chose flexible working hours to spend more time with their babies, rose from 11 per cent to 31 per cent.
- In the USA, married fathers more than doubled the time spent exclusively on childcare activities from 2.6 hours per week in 1965 to 6.5 hours in 2000.
- Australian fathers' care of children has also risen dramatically, especially the time spent in sole charge of children at home.

Risk ready

Psychological research has shown that men are more likely to take risks than women. There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the main one is that the area of the brain that weighs up risks and possible outcomes (the frontal lobes) is guarded by a filtering system called the Reticular Activating System (RAS). Simply put, this filter prevents your brain from suffering 'data overload', by helping you to choose what to pay attention to and what to ignore. In the female brain, it lets through lots of information, so women see and assess risk clearly. In the male brain, however, the filter lets through much less information. It takes much more for the male brain to 'wake up' to risk, with the result that we're likely to drive faster and jump higher off diving boards. This was probably very handy when we were engaged in the risky business of hunting bison and living in caves. Meanwhile, the mums were collecting vegetation to eat, lighting fires, making clothes, and running camps, all while watching that the kids didn't get eaten by a passing fearsome wild animal.

If you want to see this risk-taking in action, watch a dad with his child. Parenting expert Professor Ross D. Parke suggests that the dad will, most likely, be picking her up, lifting her high into the air and throwing his head back so that they are looking into each other's faces. As she laughs, he'll lower her back down, give her a shake and a tickle, and hoist her into the air again. Later on, mum might sit her daughter on her lap, talking and singing, while the baby watches, transfixed and calm.

Dads are not second-class mums

Dispel the notion that one of you will be a 'primary' and the other a 'secondary' carer. Challenge prejudice when you encounter it, but also notice when you occasionally fall into the extremes of the 'male' brain pattern. Your mission is to model your best version of what positive masculinity looks like. It will mean showing your son or daughter how a good man should be. Oh, and one more thing about the male brain? It not only takes longer to 'wake up' – it also gets bored more quickly and goes 'back to sleep' faster than the female one. Which means at night, you'll be slower to wake and faster to get back to sleep than your partner. She'll envy you that one, believe me.



Condensed idea

Play to your strengths and work on your weaknesses

3 No one's perfect

Despite the impression we sometimes get from magazines and TV commercials, there is no such thing as the perfect parent. But you can be a proud, successful (and imperfect) first-time father. Keep talking to your partner and be ready to learn from your mistakes.

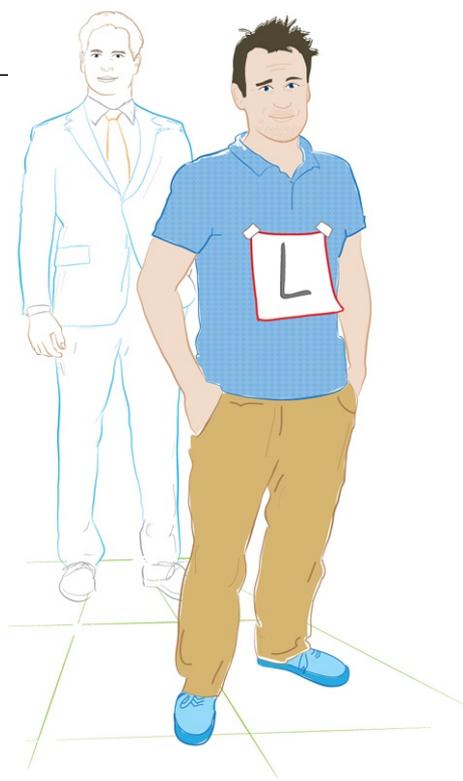
The myth of the 'Perfect Dad'

A few years ago my wife and I were invited round for a meal by some old friends. Over the previous year and a half we had noticed some subtle shifts in our relationship with them, following the arrival of their energetic baby boy. Now, when they suggested meeting up, they no longer meant a night out on the town. It meant a midday or early evening meal, usually at our house (the latter running strictly from 6.00–9.00 p.m.).

This particular evening, however, we were treated to new, fascinating insights into family life as the baby was present. We watched, entranced, as our hosts' young son took command, masterfully controlling the behaviour of his still-novice mum and dad.

Our friends uncomplainingly and repeatedly picked up food from the floor wherever their little darling threw it. They patiently negotiated every morsel of lovingly prepared food into his mouth. They displayed weak smiles when he threw the mother of all tantrums, meekly 'rewarding' his behaviour by plonking him down in front his favourite TV show for a while just to shut him up. My wife and I exchanged secret knowing glances. She knew what I was thinking. There was no way I would ever let our kids behave this way. At our house we, the parents, would be firmly in control.

There was of course only one problem with my steely determination. I wasn't a dad myself yet. In fact, it would be some years before our own baby boy came skipping into our lives. His arrival quickly wiped the self-righteous smile off my face as I got to grips with this new rough and tumble world. Before long I was running back to the very friends I had so smugly dismissed just a few years before to seek their advice.

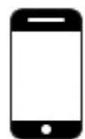


Theory vs practice

One of the problems that any new parent faces is that they are constantly invited to measure their success (or lack of it) against the manufactured images of family life that dominate the media. Endless television shows, the Internet, cinema, billboard ads and magazines portray dads who are strong but caring, high-earning but always available – it's pretty easy to get conned into thinking you're not doing it right.

Lesley Anne Page, a UK professor of midwifery, describes three mythological beings – the perfect father, mother and baby – that many new parents are convinced can (and do) exist. In the cold light of day we know it's ridiculous to think that real people are ever like this, but it's all too easy to be sucked in to an idealized and ultimately sterile view of family life. We can feel twinges of disappointment and self criticism when our own version doesn't seem to come up to scratch.

The truth is that a typical family day is often much more like an episode of *The Simpsons* than we'd ever care to admit. Remember – even the beautiful couple with the designer-clad baby, who live down the road and seem to have it all sorted out, still have their fair share of anxieties, failures and disappointments. No one is immune. But from the outside we only ever get to see a small part of a much bigger picture.



Parenting books. Check. Antenatal sessions booked. Check. Healthy food. Check. Energy drink. Check. Having a clue. Er... #Lplatedad

A bit of perspective

The sooner you come to terms with the myth of the perfect parent, the freer you will feel to develop into the father that you know you can be. ~~Remain realistic and don't try to attain the unachievable.~~ After all, none of our kids came with a personalized user's manual.

Even veteran dads with grown-up children admit that they're still making it up as they go along. Remember that as a parent you are on a stage with no script and no prior rehearsals – not even the most critical audience would expect a perfectly delivered performance. Acknowledging our L-plates can be incredibly liberating. It means we're less intimidated by other dads and the way that they do things; we're more prepared to ask for advice and opinions from other, more experienced fathers; and we're less prone to beat ourselves up over minor failures or setbacks. Accepting that the perfect dad doesn't exist in real life can be a huge weight off your mind.

Just because attaining perfection as a dad is beyond all of us, there's no reason why you can't be a fantastic, successful father – one that your child is proud of. It takes time, hard work and a lot of patient persistence, together with a willingness to ride out the bumps and accept a few mistakes and disappointments. It's a lifelong learning process.

Myth buster

Despite what some firms would have you believe, this 'perfect family' doesn't exist:

- **Perfect Father** adjusted to parenthood and became the perfect dad over night. He gazes lovingly at Perfect Baby and Perfect Mother all of the time when he's not working at his perfect, stress-free job. He is enormously helpful to Supermum (not that she needs it). He never, ever loses his temper or shouts and is always immaculately turned out.
- **Perfect Mother** looks like she stepped out of a cosmetics advert. She had a Perfect Birth and bonded with Perfect Baby in seconds. Within hours she was back to her pre-birth weight and perfect figure. Her hair, make-up and clothes are always beautiful and her house is spotless. She never feels exhausted or miserable, or wishes that she hadn't had the baby. She never stays in her pyjamas until lunchtime. Or teatime.
- **Perfect Baby** gains exactly the right amount of weight every week, rarely cries, slept through the night from week one and smiles constantly. He is always endearing, sweet, cooperative, quiet and loveable and does not require his parents to make any changes to their well-organized lives.

Condensed idea

Don't beat yourself up striving for perfection – there's no such thing as the perfect da

4 A flying start

During the fun part, one of your sperm stepped up to the mark and made a remarkable effort to fulfil its purpose. During the following few weeks, the fertilized egg will develop quickly into a foetus; by week 12 of the pregnancy he'll have all of his parts and organs.

Half and half

While conception might not normally be on your top ten list of things to think about, this is a good time to brush up on some of the biology you learned in school. During a woman's period, her uterine lining thickens and ripens, a tiny egg is prepared and friendly cervical secretions smooth the path in the hope that an intrepid sperm will come whizzing along and run smack into it.

While you're having a last hug with your partner before falling asleep (or falling out of the office stationery cupboard, if you're that kind of guy), that single, lucky sperm penetrates through the outer layers of your partner's egg and a microscopic, new bundle of cells starts to work its way down the fallopian tubes. The 23 chromosomes (genetically coded material) from your partner have joined with the 23 chromosomes you kindly provided, to create a brand new entity that has 46 chromosomes. These will pass on all sorts of hereditary traits, some good and some not so good. The gender of your future baby is also determined in this 'crash' moment, based on whether the victorious sperm contained a Y sex chromosome (boy) or an X sex chromosome (girl). The chromosomes are made up of DNA (Deoxyribonucleic Acid, in case you're interested or want to impress others with your scientific knowledge). All of the DNA in a cell make up the genome.



The thin blue line

In the first 24 hours after fertilization, the newly formed two-celled organism takes some time out to relax. It will repeat this pattern – work, relax, work, relax – in an uncanny imitation of its male progenitor right through the pregnancy. It grows like crazy then takes a long rest (the cellular/cytological equivalent of going for a drink to mull things over), allowing all the changes to integrate. After its first short break, the fertilized egg goes through an amazing growth spurt, dividing into 64 cells by day three and nearly 500 cells by day five.

Implantation into the uterus occurs around day eight. At this point the fertilized egg begins to secrete the pregnancy hormone hCG (Human Chorionic Gonadotropin – another impressive name to keep in your back pocket), which is the hormone that makes the pregnancy test develop a blue line and send everyone into a bit of a spin.

Chromosome fun facts

Chromosomes are clever bundles of DNA and protein that pass on a bunch of hereditary traits from you and your partner to your baby. These genetic footprints are also super cool in other ways:

- If you unfolded the DNA in a cell's nucleus, it would be 2 m (6½ ft) long.
- Humans are thought to have around 100 trillion cells (which is a figure that's even higher than the bank bailouts of 2008. Just.)
- If you could stick together all the DNA from all the cells in one person's body, it would string out to about 200 billion km (125 billion miles).
- Humans have only two sets of chromosomes, but wheat has four and strawberries have a

Counting the weeks

The way doctors and midwives count pregnancy weeks seems quite alien to the rest of us, because 'week one' happens before anyone knows anything about being pregnant. Basically, the counting starts from your partner's last menstrual period, not from the moment of conception. So by the time she's one week late for her period, she's already considered to be four weeks pregnant. Luckily you won't have to worry about this too much, because in all likelihood your partner will soon get to grips with the week count and you'll be able to follow her reliable lead.

A new heartbeat

During the next few weeks, the fertilized egg really gets going. The first thing it does is to develop into two distinct parts: one part will go on to become the embryo (and eventually the baby), while the other begins to form the placenta, a large, magnificent filter that sits between the mother and the baby, making sure all the good stuff in her blood gets through, while keeping out the bad. In goes all the important nutrients, hormones, electrolytes and antibodies that the baby needs, and out comes everything that the baby doesn't want (its waste products), all via this incredible blood filtering system. The placenta also protects the baby from the mother's immune system – allowing her body to recognize the growing embryo as a kind of foreign graft without rejecting it.



This baby – it's definitely happening. Time to man up and take responsibility – ready to teach him about life (skateboard already ordered). #activedad

By the start of the fifth week, the fertilized egg is about the size of a poppy seed. By the sixth week, a primitive heart begins to beat, and a small, rudimentary circulatory system begins to form, along with a backbone. By week eight a small face and tiny rudimentary fingers and toes are visible. By the end of the first trimester (12 weeks) the foetus is the size of an apricot, and all the body parts and major organs have formed. The muscles respond to brain signals, and the foetus is beginning to stretch and move on his own. Your baby is now all systems go!

Condensed idea

Your baby grows from zero to practically fully formed in 12 weeks

5 Her first few weeks

Whether planned or unplanned, this pregnancy will give you and your partner a lot of things to consider and talk about. By engaging with what's going on for her and her changing body you can begin to participate in this new life from its earliest stages.

Trimesters

A normal pregnancy lasts around 37 to 42 weeks, or an average of 40 weeks from the first day of a woman's last period. Statistically babies rarely come exactly 'on time' in the 40th week, but a pregnancy is split into three time stages known as 'trimesters'. These are a useful way of describing and understanding the changes that take place. The first trimester is 1–12 weeks, the second 13–27 and the third 28–41 weeks.

Sick and tired

Not everyone discovers they are pregnant at the same time within the first trimester. For women who have a regular menstrual cycle, the earliest sign is a missed period. However, some women who are pregnant may still have a very light period. Equally, she may find out later on by using a test or by picking up the signs of early pregnancy. Classically, these include tiredness, feeling sick, peeing more often or having unusually tender breasts. But every woman and every pregnancy is different so some signs may be more prevalent than others.

Many women feel sick, and some actually are sick in early pregnancy – doctors estimate that between 50 and 90 per cent of all pregnant women will experience 'morning sickness'. And despite its name, it can actually happen at any time throughout the day or night. In particular, certain smells and tastes may make her nauseous so try to be sensitive to what they might be. (The favourite late night kebab or curry, for example, might be a 'no no' for a while, unless you want a lot of clearing up to do.) Some foods that seem totally inoffensive to you (meat, chicken, eggs) might suddenly make her queasy. If the sickness is very frequent, she might start feeling quite despairing about the pregnancy, so be ready to reassure her that most women are free of morning sickness once they get past the first trimester, and find ways to help her hang on in there.

It might be helpful to point out that research shows that women who suffer severe morning sickness are less likely to have low-birthweight babies or miscarry – so that's definitely good news. Eating small snacks throughout the day can help, so buy a few bags of unsalted rice cakes or pretzels for her to keep in her handbag or by the bed (she'll probably want to eat something on waking – this often stops the nausea). Ginger tea sometimes works like magic. This is because when ginger is heated or cooked, one of its constituents transforms into a molecule known as zingerone, which binds to neural

receptors in the brain and confuses it. It's impossible for someone to 'think about' nausea and ginger at the same time, so put ginger biscuits and tea on your shopping list.



Shopping list reads: 'folic acid, fruit, high-fibre cereal and listening ear'.

#emotionalintelligence

Emotional ups and downs

As the first trimester continues, you might notice that your partner's emotional highs and lows become magnified. The slightest thing can make her weep (this even includes TV commercials) or fall about laughing. Don't worry – she's not going crazy, she's just pregnant. Hormonal changes are affecting her neurotransmitters (chemical messengers in the brain), which – coupled with the scare of being pregnant, which she'll feel no matter how much she wanted this – add up to an interesting combination, to say the least.

Your partner may want to spend a lot of time sleeping, and not with you. Don't assume this means anything other than she's tired – making a baby from scratch is an exhausting business, and it's literally taking a lot out of her. Think about taking the initiative and giving her a bit more space than normal, while being on hand to help out when she feels at her most shattered. Be there, but don't be intrusive (think like a butler). Sensitivity now will definitely earn you a brownie point or two.



Adapting lifestyles

This will also be the time when your partner will be getting to grips with adapting her lifestyle to give your baby the best start. Stopping smoking and cutting down on her alcohol intake (ideally cutting it

out) are two of the big ones and she will welcome your support if she needs to do so. A healthy, high fibre diet, including folic acid supplements, will also be an important part of keeping your partner fit and healthy.

Help her keep active, too. Walking, swimming and cycling are perfect ways to exercise and you can do these together. Or apart – if that's what she wants! Suggest but don't push, and be ready with big hugs at all times.

Your first 12 weeks

- Although you may not be ready to tell the world yet, choose one or two good friends whom you trust and know really well (perhaps your own dad) to talk to about this new life-changing news.
- Do your bit to help your partner reduce her morning sickness symptoms: plenty of rest, eating little and often and avoiding smells that make her nauseous.
- If your partner is struggling to keep any food or fluid down, encourage her to see her GP or midwife.
- It's best for a mum not to drink alcohol during pregnancy. You could consider adjusting your own alcohol intake to help her reduce hers.
- Smoking is bad news for babies. Support your partner by both trying to give up together.
- Begin to think – and talk with your partner – about attending scans and the birth itself. Be honest about your anxieties but be prepared to face up to them.

Condensed idea

This can be a tough time for your partner, so try to be understanding of her needs

6 Sex in pregnancy

When it comes to sex, a man's response to his pregnant partner can differ from one guy to the next. It's not uncommon for an expectant dad to go off sex during pregnancy. Alternatively you may find your partner's ever-changing body a complete turn-on.

Can you do it? (Yes you can)

First, let's get the facts straight. It's perfectly safe to have sex during pregnancy, both for your partner and the unborn child. If you're having a normal pregnancy there's no reason why you can't continue to enjoy the regular sex life you had pre-conception, if that's what you both want to do. The exception to this may be if your partner has a history of cervical weakness, a low-lying placenta, bleeding or some other complicating factor, in which case it's a good idea to check with your doctor or midwife first.

Whether you want to have sex, however, can be a different matter. Some couples find it very enjoyable during pregnancy, while others simply feel that they don't want to as often (or perhaps at all), or limit it to the early or middle stages when it might be physically easier. Pre-pregnancy, sex is likely to have been an important part of your relationship so when it changes in terms of when, how and how often, be prepared for it to affect you both in different ways and to differing degrees.

It's very common for dads to experience a dip in their levels of desire throughout their partner's pregnancy. This can often be attributed to four common factors: worrying that it could damage the baby in some way (it can't); concerns for their partner and their baby's health; feelings of apprehension about becoming a dad themselves; or that it simply 'feels wrong' to make love in the presence of their unborn child.



Women, too, find that their sex drive fluctuates tremendously throughout pregnancy. It's common for women to want sex less during the first trimester as this usually coincides with nausea, tiredness, tender breasts and frequent trips to the toilet, none of which appear in the book of 'World's Top 10 Sexiest Things'. On the other hand, research shows that the second trimester is a time when women feel the most sexual desire, only for it to take a dip again in the third as the prospect of birth and labour – and the practicalities of a large belly – begin to take hold.

For some couples, pregnancy has the effect of lighting the touch paper as far as sex is concerned. Many men love the changing nature of their partner's body – beautiful complexion, fuller breasts and rounder hips – and neither of you has to worry about contraception as it's way too late for that. Women are of course free from their periods and, due to the increased blood flow to the pelvic region, often discover that they can be more easily sexually aroused.



Debbie's suggested getting more creative in our love life. Must check the strength of the chandelier in the living room. #Ishouldbesolucky

Let's talk about sex

It's not unusual to find it difficult to talk openly about sex, especially if you've rarely spoken about it with your partner before. But during these changing, emotional and responsibility-filled times, clear and honest communication is as important as ever. It provides each of you with a positive outlet for your feelings and the opportunity to tackle problems together before they threaten to overwhelm you. There's no need to hop onto the virtual psychiatrist's couch every time you open your mouth, but it's OK to be honest about your sex life – rampant or dormant – and how it's affecting you.

Many couples don't say anything for fear of hurting their partner's feelings, but if you can pick the

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