



Dear Dr. Hoo,

My husband and I have been trying to get pregnant but without much success as my menstrual cycles are very irregular and sometimes non-existent. Do you have any ideas?

My first recommendation is to speak to your medical doctor for a referral to a specialist to rule out any serious causes for your menstrual dysfunction such as uterine fibroids or endometriosis.

In general, menstrual irregularity (metrorrhagia) or absence (amenorrhea) reflects an underlying disorder resulting in hormonal imbalance and as a result, many women opt for an oral birth control pill in order to regulate this imbalance.

While this may provide an immediate solution, it does not address the underlying cause. For example, researchers at Emory University in Atlanta have performed extensive research studying the effects of stress on fertility in women. More specifically, these researchers are studying the effects of chronic stress on alterations in chemicals being released by the hypothalamus (the master gland in the brain) and how they affect the pituitary and ovary in regulating sex-steroid hormones. Their studies published in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* reported that women who did not ovulate had excessive levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) in the brain fluid.

In essence, it is hypothesized that during periods of chronic stress, the increased production of cortisol occurs at the expense of androgens (eg. testosterone) and estrogens resulting in an improper balance of hormones for the healthy regulation of women's menstrual cycles.

As such, women who are exposed to chronic stress (eg. long work hours, excessive exercise) and are infertile or who experience menstrual irregularity consider stress management as a viable option to promote fertility while avoiding the expensive and sometimes risky fertility drugs. These options may include cognitive behavioral therapy, yoga, meditation or calming herbs such as lemon balm or passionflower in order to reduce the stress response and ultimately cortisol production.

If you or a loved one is suffering from infertility or menstrual irregularity, please consult with your healthcare provider to ensure that your healthcare goals are addressed or call us for further information.

Dr. Aaron Hoo

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