

Fertility computers for birth control? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What have you heard about fertility computers? I've heard European women swear by them. Are they a good birth control option?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Computers are used for just about everything nowadays, so why not use them for fertility purposes? For centuries, people have used fertility tracking as a way to avoid pregnancy, but with the advances in technology computers can now aid in the process. Throughout a person's menstrual cycle, their chances of conceiving fluctuates. Some people choose to use fertility awareness as a natural form of birth control and avoid sex during the most fertile parts of their menstrual cycle. While there are a number of tools and gadgets to help track this, for the most part, they're not designed for birth control specifically. Rather, they help to track when people are most likely to conceive, providing information about when to have or avoid sex based on what their goals are around conception. Additionally, while they can be an effective birth control option for some people, their use requires diligent daily monitoring, along with generally consistent menstrual cycles. Otherwise, this method may be less effective as a means of birth control.

Generally, the most fertile time in the cycle is within one week before ovulation (when an egg is released from the ovaries). That being said, it's possible to get pregnant at other times in the cycle. Ovulation occurs for most folks about 10 to 14 days before they start their period; during this time, a variety of physiological changes occur in the body. The fertility computers are often monitoring these changes to determine when a person has the best chances of getting pregnant. There are a variety of fertility calculators available (ranging in price from hundreds of dollars per device to free smartphone apps), but most tools help determine when an individual is most fertile by using the following strategies:

- **Calendar calculations:** A simple day counting method may be able to track a person's cycle to determine when they may be ovulating and when they're less likely to conceive.
- **Basal body temperature:** During ovulation, a person's fully rested body temperature often rises. Measuring body temperature when a person first wakes up every morning may help

identify where in their monthly cycle they are and whether they're ovulating.

- **Hormone levels:** Usually, ovulation is triggered by a hormone called the luteinizing hormone. There are some home urine tests that detect rises in this hormone, which can help individuals determine whether they're close to ovulation.
- **Cervical mucus:** The cervical mucus released by the body changes over the course of the menstrual cycle. When mucus is clear and elastic, it's typically a sign that a person is ovulating.

Before using a fertility computer, there are certain factors that will be helpful to keep in mind. If someone has irregular menstrual cycles or has cycles longer than 35 days, some fertility monitors may not be as effective. Another factor to consider is that the primary purpose of these tools is to determine when someone is most fertile during their cycle (rather than when they're least fertile). In fact, some of the apps that can track menstrual cycles add disclaimers that they aren't intended for pregnancy prevention. If you do choose to use them for pregnancy prevention, when used consistently and correctly, the fertility computers have an error rate of about 0.5 percent, which is comparable to other forms of birth control such as hormonal birth control. However, many people are drawn and more commonly use the smartphone applications due to their costs (often being free), lack of hormones, and because they don't require a prescription. Some have been approved for marketing by the Food and Drug Administration, but even so, they still note that pregnancy may occur with correct and consistent use of the method. All that to say, even with the more expensive and complex fertility computers, there's always a chance that an inaccurate reading or an irregular cycle will make the device less effective. Other methods of birth control offer higher rates of effectiveness when it comes to pregnancy prevention. If that's what you're after, you may want to stick with [condoms](#) [2], [hormonal birth control](#) [3], and [other forms of contraception](#) [4] instead of or in addition to the fertility computers.

Computers make life easier in many ways, but when it comes to birth control, they're still working out the glitches.

Alice!

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