ALANEME FAVOUR UJU

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What is implantation?

We don’t know if we should blame Hollywood or the false reality of social media, but the phrase “getting pregnant” gets tossed around as if it’s a simple one-step process. But there are actually a ton of tiny, amazing things that need to happen in your body to result in pregnancy.

After the sperm and the egg join (conception), the combined cells start multiplying pretty quickly and moving through one of your fallopian tubes to your uterus. This cluster of rapidly growing cells is called a blastocyst.

Once in your uterus, this little bundle of cells has to attach, or implant, into your uterine wall. This step — known as implantation — triggers rising levels of all those fun pregnancy hormones (estrogen, progesterone, and hCG, or human chorionic gonadotropin).

If implantation doesn’t happen, your uterine lining is shed in your normal monthly period — a serious disappointment if you’re trying to get pregnant, but a reminder that your body is likely prepping for you to try again.

But if implantation does occur, your hormones — sometimes a nuisance, but doing their job — cause the placenta and the embryo (your future baby) to develop and your uterine lining to stay in place and support your pregnancy.

Implantation takes place anywhere between 6 and 12 days after you ovulate. It most commonly occurs 8 to 9 days after conception. So the exact date of implantation can depend on when you ovulated, and whether conception occurred early or late in the ovulation window.

When you’re hoping to get pregnant, it’s natural to be very aware of your body and notice every change, no matter how small.

Assuming a lack of symptoms means you’re not pregnant? Not so fast. Keep in mind that most women experience no signs at all of conception or implantation — and are still pregnant! — though some women do experience signs of implantation.

Let’s explore some symptoms you might notice if implantation has occurred, but keep our little disclaimer in mind:

Having the symptoms listed below doesn’t necessarily mean you’re pregnant — and having no symptoms doesn’t necessarily mean you’re not.

Possible signs of implantation

Bleeding

It’s actually a little unclear how common implantation bleeding is. Some sources claim that one-third of all women who become pregnant experience implantation bleeding, but this actually isn’t backed by peer-reviewed research. (Something on the internet that may not be true? Say it ain’t so!)

Here’s what we can tell you. Up to 25 percent of women experience bleeding or spotting in the first trimester — and implantation is one cause of first trimester bleeding.

This bleeding can be confusing, because it may happen around the time that your regular period would start. Most commonly though, it will occur a few days to a week before you expect your menstrual period.

There are other differences that can help you determine whether you are experiencing implantation bleeding or your period:

implantation bleeding is most likely to be light pink or brown (as opposed to the bright or dark red of your period)

implantation bleeding is more like spotting than an actual flow of blood

This spotting may occur once, or last for a few hours, or even up to three days. You may notice some pink or brown discharge when you wipe or on your underwear, but you won’t need a full pad or tampon — possibly not for many months!

Cramps

It’s no secret that early pregnancy causes a rapid shift of hormones. More specifically, implantation is a trigger for the hormone surge — that’s why you can’t get that second pink line on a home pregnancy test until after implantation.

And the changing hormonal tide can also cause cramping. Furthermore, there’s a lot going on in your uterus as the fertilized egg implants and begins to grow.

While there’s no research indicating that implantation itself causes cramps, some women do feel abdominal tenderness, lower back pain, or cramping around the time of implantation. This may seem like a mild version of how you feel before your period starts.

Discharge

Let’s talk about what’s going on down there.

If you’ve been monitoring your cervical mucus, good work, future mama! Being aware of what’s going on with your body can be empowering when trying to conceive.

You may notice some cervical mucus changes around the time of implantation.

During ovulation, your cervical mucus will be clear, stretchy, and slippery (sort of like egg whites). You probably already know this as your green light to get your baby dance on.

After implantation occurs, your mucus might have a thicker, “gummier” texture and be clear or white in color.

And in the days of early pregnancy, rising progesterone and estrogen may cause your mucus to become even thicker, more profuse, and white or yellow in color.

We hate to say it, though: Cervical mucus can be affected by a number of things (hormones, stress, intercourse, pregnancy, implantation bleeding or your period, etc.) and may not be a reliable indicator of whether or not implantation has occurred.

Start tracking your cervical mucus while you’re not pregnant, and a more useful indicator may be how different it is from your norm during each stage of your cycle.

Bloating

Rising progesterone (which happens in early pregnancy) slows your digestive system down. This can make you feel bloated. But as so many of us know, this feeling can be a really common symptom of your period, too. Want to know why? Progesterone also rises when your period is imminent. Thanks, hormones.

Tender breasts

After implantation, levels of hCG, estrogen, and progesterone all increase rapidly. This can cause your boobs to feel very sore. (These hormones sure are multitaskers!) While many women experience breast swelling or tenderness before their periods, this is likely to be more noticeable than usual in very early pregnancy.

Nausea

Ah, arguably the most famous of the early pregnancy symptoms: nausea, aka “morning sickness” (though it can happen at any time of day).

Increased levels of progesterone following implantation can make you feel nauseous. But again, this most commonly occurs around 4 or 5 weeks of pregnancy (about the time you miss your period).

Progesterone slows down your digestion, which can contribute to nausea. Rising hCG levels and a more sensitive sense of smell can make the problem worse — so now might be a good time to avoid cooking liver and onions.

Headaches

While they’re good and necessary for a successful pregnancy, those wildly rising hormone levels (particularly progesterone) can also give you headaches following implantation.

Mood swings

Find yourself content and happy one minute, and weeping at a commercial on TV the next? Or excited to see your partner in the evening and then biting their head off over nothing? You may be experiencing mood swings.

Estrogen and progesterone, as well as hCG, increase very quickly following implantation. This can make you feel “off” or moodier than usual.

Implantation dip

While this sounds like some kind of weird appetizer, “implantation dip” refers to a one-day decrease in your basal body temperature that can occur as a result of implantation.

If you’ve been tracking your basal body temperature (BBT) to help identify your most fertile days, you likely already have a log of your daily BBT over the course of a few months.

Typically, a woman’s temperature is lower before ovulation, and then increases, and then drops again before her period starts. If you get pregnant, your temperature remains elevated.

Simple, right? Except there’s something else.

Some women seem to experience a one-day drop in temperature around the time of implantation. This is different than the drop in temperature that means your period is coming — in the case of an imminent period, your temperature would stay low.

In the case of implantation dip, your temp drops for one day and then goes back up. It’s thought that this might be due to a rise in estrogen, but it’s not entirely understood.

According to an analysis of more than 100,000 BBT charts from the popular app Fertility Friend, 75 percent of pregnant women using the app did not experience an implantation dip. Additionally, a dip was noted on approximately 11 percent of the charts of women who were not pregnant.

But it’s pretty interesting that 23 percent of app users who turned out to be pregnant did have a so-called implantation dip.

This isn’t a peer-reviewed, medically conducted study. (We wish it were — when will researchers get on this?) But it may be helpful when it comes to interpreting your BBT chart. An implantation dip is more likely if you’re pregnant than if you’re not, but you can absolutely still be pregnant without a dip.

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The takeaway

Trying to get pregnant can be both an exciting and nerve-wracking time. The days and months of your cycle can feel like forever when you’re waiting for a baby, and it’s easy to notice every tiny change in your body and wonder if it means you’re pregnant. This isn’t bad — knowledge is empowering — and in fact, it’s a very normal thing to do.

Some women do notice signs and symptoms that implantation has occurred. Signs may include light bleeding, cramping, nausea, bloating, sore breasts, headaches, mood swings, and possibly a change in basal body temperature.

But — and here’s the frustrating part — many of these signs are very similar to PMS. Additionally, most women experience no signs of implantation at all and are in fact pregnant.

The best way to know for sure if you’re pregnant is to take an at-home pregnancy test or call your doctor. (Keep in mind that even if you have implantation symptoms, it takes a few days for enough hCG to build up to turn a test positive.)

The “two week wait” — the time between ovulation and when you can usually get a positive pregnancy test — can test all your patience. Keep paying attention to you and your body, find some activities you particularly enjoy to take your mind off the wait, and know that you’re going to be an amazing parent.