

*Transcript of Interviews with Drs. Walter Willett, Chair, and Jorge Chavarro, Research Fellow, HSPH Department of Nutrition
Diet and Lifestyle in the Prevention of Ovulatory Disorder Infertility
October 2007*

Q. What is the key message of your paper?

WILLETT: The key message of our upcoming paper on diet and fertility is that making the right dietary choices, and also including the right amount of physical activity in your daily life, can make a large difference in your probability of becoming fertile.

Q. Specifically, what type of infertility did you examine?

WILLETT: Our primary outcome in this analysis that we've looked at has been fertility due to anovulation, really failure of the ovary to ovulate and produce a viable egg. And of course, other kinds of fertility, and there are other kinds of fertility, are probably not going to be so affected by diet. For example, blocked tubes that may have been the result of an infection in the past, no amount of dietary manipulation is likely to open up those blocked tubes. There are some other kinds of fertility, though, due to endometriosis, for example, that may well be affected by diet. So our focus here was on failure to ovulate, but there are some other aspects of fertility that are probably going to be partly diet-related also.

Q. What are some of the paper's findings?

CHAVARRO: So we've identified several factors that are related to lower chance of infertility due to ovulation disorders. I think the most important of them are the ones that are also proven to have other beneficial facts on pregnancy outcomes. So most importantly, taking folic-acid containing multivitamins, which we've found to be associated with a lower chance of infertility, but has also been known for a long time to prevent neural tube defects, so congenital defects of the central nervous system and potentially other congenital defects.

And the other one is achieving a healthy weight, which has been shown by many different groups to affect fertility beneficially, and is also known to reduce the chances of experiencing some pregnancy-related complications like gestational diabetes or preeclampsia.

Now, on top of that, we've also found some more notable dietary factors that we – that we've found to be related to a lower chance of infertility. And I think choosing between those should be pretty much up to what women feel comfortable or not in making changes to their diet. So for example, one is avoiding trans fats, which have been known for a while to affect heart disease risk in both men and women and may also be associated with diabetes, both gestational, type 2 diabetes. So there really isn't any good reason to be consuming trans fats, so those can be taken off the diet.

Others are choosing lower – choosing low glycemic carbohydrates such as pasta, whole grain, and whole grains, as opposed to white bread and white rice, because they have an effect on blood glucose and on insulin levels in the body that make it easier for women to have normal ovulation and become pregnant.

Another factor that we've identified is that women who consume protein primarily from vegetable sources have higher chance of getting pregnant than women who consume sources, I mean from primarily animal sources, especially red meats and chicken, with fish and eggs having no apparent detrimental effect. So on top of – So ideally, you would be – you should be able to switch gradually from animal sources of protein to vegetable sources of protein, and we have found that to have a very strong effect on fertility in women.

We also found that high-fat dairy products are associated with a lower risk of infertility due to ovulation disorders, whereas low-fat dairy products had the exact opposite effect.

Q. What does this paper tell us?

WILLETT: What we see is really a whole lifestyle package, and if we follow these good nutritional choices, perhaps just even a little bit temporary about the higher-fat milk, but otherwise this whole package will help someone have a healthy pregnancy and help the woman herself stay healthy throughout the years.