



## Green for a baby

How trying to conceive inspired a more natural lifestyle for this writer.

“Avez vous le Wesson?”

My husband and I were at a quaint Parisian market on the first evening of a romantic getaway, and I was desperately trying to recall my high school French. We needed vegetable oil, we needed it now, and I feared my urgency was not translating quickly enough. “Avez vous le Crisco?” I stammered. “Avez vous l’huile végétale?” Bingo. The cashier handed us a fresh bottle, and we beat a hasty retreat over cobblestone paths to our hotel. Our mission, however, was not to fry up a batch of glistening *pommes frites*. This bottle of vegetable oil was going to help us get pregnant.

When you’re trapped in the soul-crushing cycle of infertility, you’ll do pretty much anything and everything to up your odds of conceiving. At one point, about a year into our struggle, I would estimate that 90 percent of my daily decisions revolved around the question, “Will this help me get pregnant?” From the foods and beverages that passed my lips to the intensity with which I worked out, from whether I canceled my weekly therapy appointment to squeeze in a meeting with a new reproductive endocrinologist, I quite literally didn’t take a step without contemplating its potential to aid us in creating a baby.

Back in the fall of 2009, when Dan and I booked that vacation to France—a last hurrah during which, we naïvely believed, we would quickly conceive and pop out a little one 40 weeks later—we had yet to know the path that lay before us, one riddled with anovulatory potholes and a roadblocked fallopian tube. Back then, we thought having unprotected sex was the best way to get me pregnant—a notion I now consider hopelessly retro. Still, I wanted to up our odds, and I had read somewhere that commercial lubricants trapped even the most Michael Phelpsian of sperm. Vegetable oil, one random website assured me, was far more natural and effective.

Our week of slippery romps in the City of Lights did not land me pregnant. A few months of Clomid, an oral drug designed to spur ovulation, failed, as did intrauterine insemination, when the doctor

directly deposited sperm into the uterus to facilitate fertilization. By the summer of 2010, it was on to the Big Guns: in vitro fertilization (IVF), which would require me to inject myself multiple times a day with hardcore hormones in an effort to turn my ovaries into pint-sized follicle factories. My eggs would be surgically retrieved and would then rendezvous with Dan's sperm in a petri dish. (At least *they* got to enjoy a little hanky panky.) After

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three to five days of incubation, it was time to deposit two hopefully lucky embryos back into my uterus ... and begin the emotionally grueling two-week wait.

Clearly, this was about as far from "natural" as we could get. On multiple occasions, I asked each of our doctors if they recommended any alternative therapies. Should I switch to organic produce and meat? Replace my intense, sweat-soaked workouts with yoga? Attempt to will my ovaries into functioning via guided imagery tapes? Consistently, I was met with blank stares and shaking heads.

But I have always believed in the body's ability to heal itself and wanted to tap into that potential. Most of the treatments and therapies I had been using involved *someone else doing something to me*: Physicians prescribing me drugs, ultrasound technicians guiding wands into my vagina, my husband injecting mile-long, progesterone-filled needles into my tush. I wanted to do something on my own.

And so, in an effort to boost the effectiveness of the endless shots, surgeries, pills and therapies, I made a few wholesale changes of my own. With advice from my acupuncturist, my already-stellar diet received a fertility-enhancing makeover. I switched to organic dairy, eggs, fish and chicken in an attempt to decrease the sheer volume of hormones coursing through my veins. I committed the Environmental Working Group's Dirty Dozen list to memory and started buying pesticide-free spinach, apples, berries and potatoes. A longtime salad devotee, I began steaming my vegetables, as my acupuncturist deemed raw produce "too cold" for a system begging to be warmed up, and I learned how to roast beets—purported to be pro-fertility—every Sunday, popping them like giant, ruby-colored Tic Tacs throughout the week. My kitchen vaguely resembled a bloodbath, but every time I glanced down at my crimson-stained fingertips, I was reminded that *I was doing something*.

At the gym, I substituted one elliptical session per week with yoga. My instructor opened class by asking us to set an intention. Crouched in Chair pose, arms outstretched overhead, I gazed skyward and visualized a baby.

Suffering angst over the landfills I'd be polluting with the 20-plus syringes I was plowing through each week, I discovered a mail-in needle disposal system that transforms medical waste into pellets used to construct everything from park benches to highways. Instantly,

an emotionally painful process metamorphosed into something full of promise.

Breakfasts were chased with red raspberry tea, which earned the ruefully affectionate nickname "Utie Tonic" in our home (short for Uterine Tonic, as it was labeled on the box from Whole Foods). It was no chai latte, but knowing I was possibly advancing our cause tasted good. I swapped out harsh chemicals for eco-friendly household cleaners and became a freak about BPA—a smart move for anyone, procreation-minded or not. A simple conversation with my local Starbucks barista soon resembled that of a prison interrogation chamber: "Are you sure this is decaf?" "You didn't accidentally give me soy milk, did you?" "Paper cup, not plastic!" I'm sure

the staff rolled their collective eyes at me, but my newly organic method of ordering made me feel more in control.

At night, I would kiss Dan and roll out of bed and into the family room, where my laptop lay waiting, a fertility-specific guided imagery DVD queued up to the appropriate day of my IVF cycle. With the lights off, I'd lie down, pull a blanket up to my neck and follow the suggestions of the woman with the mellifluous voice, who told me to imagine anxiety-soothing cream dripping through the cracks and crevices of my brain. Then I'd picture my ovaries working diligently and productively—or, if we had just finished a round of IVF, the embryo snuggling deep into my uterine wall.

I even invited another man into our baby-making: George Carlin. A 2011 Israeli study found that women entertained by clowns immediately post-IVF embryo transfer were more than twice as likely to conceive as patients who didn't bond with Bozo, presumably due to reduced stress and anxiety. Shockingly, my insurance didn't cover circus folk, so we simply brought my laptop and the stand-up comic's DVD with us into the O.R. for a little post-transfer chuckle.

I did, however, draw the line at pouring goat milk in my Kashi, which I was told might help decrease mucus production; I simply could not stomach the barnyard taste at breakfast.

After nearly two years of medical intervention, an operation to remove my left fallopian tube, two failed IVFs, an early miscarriage and a horrific bout of Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome (my overstimulated ovaries leaked 2½ liters of fluid into my belly and chest cavity, which had to be surgically drained), we were pregnant. I don't necessarily look at our new baby girl and think that stirring "warming" cinnamon into my oatmeal or forgoing "cold" watermelon are what made her stick. I attribute my pregnancy, first and foremost, to the scientific miracle of IVF and the skill of our fertility team. But I know I helped us get here by taking positive, proactive steps in my nutrition, lifestyle, stress reduction and more. These eco- (and ovo-) conscious changes were empowering at a time when I felt out of control, comforting when life seemed unfair, and I continue to embrace them.

Except for the vegetable oil. That stays in the kitchen. ✘

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