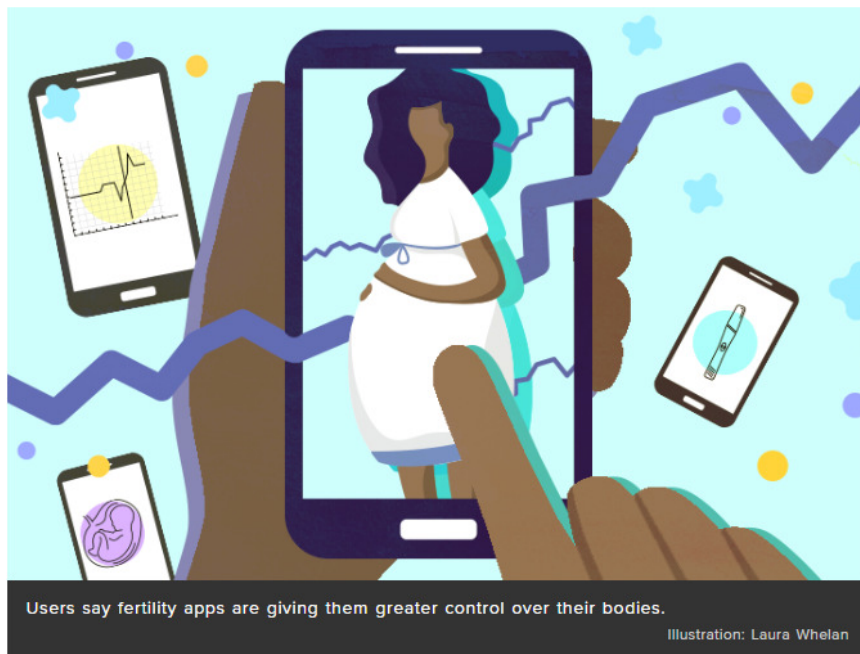


# How fertility apps are changing the way women conceive

By Laura Hensley – National Online Journalist, Smart Living Global News

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Users say fertility apps are giving them greater control over their bodies.

Illustration: Laura Whelan

When 28-year-old Iryna McVeigh wanted to get pregnant, she turned to her phone.

Using the fertility app Glow, McVeigh plugged in information like the date of her last period and the length of her cycle. The app, which lets women know when to expect their period and when they're most fertile, also records data like sexual activity and health information.

"My goal was to learn more about my cycle, and in particular, my ovulation days," McVeigh told Global News. "[The app] taught me about my most fertile days, and provided me with actual percentages of achieving pregnancy."

Three months after McVeigh downloaded the app, she became pregnant.

"I didn't think an app could actually be precise in tracking my period or ovulation, but Glow was pretty spot-on," she said.

## How effective are fertility apps?

Like McVeigh, 29-year-old Ashley Szakal leaned on technology when she was ready to conceive.

The marketing and communications professional had used Glow for years to track her period, but in 2018, she updated her profile on the app to reflect her current life stage: trying to get pregnant. It was then that she started paying closer attention to when she ovulated.

"[My husband and I] used that to figure out when the perfect time was to start trying to get pregnant, and it actually worked really well for us," she said. "We got pregnant right away."

According to Ann Mullen, director of health education for family planning company Cycle Technologies, certain fertility apps are highly effective. She says an app's accuracy depends on how well it interprets a user's information and gives that information back to them.

DOT, a Cycle Technologies' app that helps "plan or prevent pregnancy," lets users know their chances of conceiving on any given day, Mullen explains. A user is asked to enter their period start date each month, and after a few cycles, the app can better predict a woman's chance of pregnancy.

"The DOT app is an algorithm-based method, so it takes vastly more information into consideration than just the user's period start date," Mullen said. "The entire method is based on a culmination of decades of research, [including] things like background in fertility awareness methods, reproductive biology, loads and loads of fertility statistics and research that we've done."

Research found that DOT had a failure rate of 3.5 per cent within the first six cycles of using the app.

Dr. Karen Glass, the director of fertility preservation at Toronto's CREATe Fertility Clinic, says that an app's accuracy can vary, and a user's cycle can play a role. "The more regular [the cycle], the better the app will work," she said.

Dr. Caitlin Dunne, a fertility doctor at Vancouver's Pacific Centre for Reproductive Medicine, agrees.

"If the woman has cycles that typically vary outside of 21-35 days, then the app is not going to work as well," she said. "This is because the app is simply using the calendar method to 'average out' the cycles and predict ovulation."

Dunne says irregular cycles may also be a symptom of other issues, like PCOS, thyroid problems and low ovarian reserve, which require a doctor's attention. "An app can't diagnose those things, and that is why a fertility specialist is so important for these women," she added.

It's also important for women to seek medical advice if they've been trying to get pregnant for a year without any success, or are over 40. Furthermore, if there are suspected fertility issues with a male partner, it's important to see an expert.

While both Glass and Dunne agree fertility apps can be useful tools, users should not solely rely on their information when trying to prevent pregnancy — even if your phone says your chances of pregnancy are low.

"Period tracking apps are much less reliable than other methods [of birth control]," Dunne said. "Other methods like birth control pills or IUDs are much, much more reliable if getting pregnant is *not* something the woman wants at that time. So it is a highly personal choice."

## Making the investment

Twenty-eight-year-old Kasey Petrie did her research before she bought Ava, a fertility-tracking bracelet. The daycare program director started trying to conceive two years ago with no luck.

After she suffered a miscarriage, she said she “gave up” trying to get pregnant the “natural” way, and started looking at fertility devices.

The Fitbit-esque bracelet was quite costly for her at the time — it currently retails for \$399 — but Petrie thought the investment was worth it.

The bracelet is worn at night, and collects a user’s data like sleep, physiological stress levels and resting heart rate. In the morning, the information syncs up with the bracelet’s app on your phone.

“When you first set it up, they ask you all sorts of questions like when was your last menstrual cycle and how many days was your last menstrual cycle,” she said. “It then syncs you up with a calendar and it will give you your four best days to try to conceive, and [tells you] when you should be expecting your next period.”

Petrie said she used Ava for about four months before anything happened. She says because her periods were irregular, she didn’t have a reliable log. The company says Ava has been shown to detect an average of 5.3 fertile days per cycle at 89 per cent accuracy, but that stat can be affected by the regularity of a user’s cycle.

After a few months of wearing Ava, Petrie got pregnant in December. “You can use [Ava] during pregnancy as well — it has a mode you can switch over — so I definitely feel like it’s become more in tune with [my body],” she said.

While Petrie found success with the device, the company says Ava has not been tested with “diagnosed fertility conditions that interrupt normal ovulation such as PCOS or hypothalamic amenorrhea.” It is also not to be used by women on birth control.

## What about users’ data?

While apps rely on users’ data for accuracy, the amount of personal information given can be troubling to some.

Szagal says she likes using pregnancy apps now that she’s expecting her first child, and while she shares certain data like her due date, she avoids using her full name on message boards and forums.

“I’m very aware of what my phone can do, can hear, and what information it takes,” she explained.

McVeigh, however, says she doesn’t share any information online that she’s uncomfortable with, and was never concerned about her data being shared.

“I think if you are on an app like this, you should be comfortable with sharing your menstrual cycle and other info about your path to conceiving,” she said. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t use them in the first place.”

According to Mullen, DOT does not store women’s data, and does not share any information with third parties.

“The apps [live] only on the person’s phone ... and anything a user puts on there is only on the app *on* the phone,” she said. “The only way we would ever know [user’s data] is if the user contacted us and decided to share information.”

## Are fertility apps empowering women?

Being able to track your fertility on your phone is “playing a huge part in making women more aware of their bodies” and giving them a sense of control, Szakal says.

“I have quite a few friends who are pregnant right now who had no idea... when they were ovulating, and it was a bit of a guessing game,” she said. “But I’m a big planner, so the [apps] helped me strategize.”

McVeigh agrees, and says that fertility apps allow women to better plan their lives. She also likes the community aspects of pregnancy apps, like online forums, as they allow women to connect with others “who are experiencing the same issues as you may be.”

But with all their perks, Szakal says the endless information from apps can be a lot. “I found in my first trimester, having access to a lot of this information and [having] apps tell you what you should and shouldn’t be feeling was almost overwhelming,” she said.

Still, Mullen is confident apps give women greater control over their fertility.

“Women can track their health symptoms and moods, and have a lot of information in their hands,” she said. “I think that helps them see their own patterns, and know what’s usual or normal for them.”

“And if something is starting to come up, they can recognize it maybe a bit more quickly because they’ve been tracking things, and they can go talk to their doctor.”

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