

Blame It on the Moon

By Jane Worthington
March 16, 2006

Can Earth's satellite really affect our moods and fertility? Jane Worthington reports.

For those who lament their blue moods, anxiety or even a touch of gout - we can point our fingers at the moon, science suggests. According to a study last year at Leeds University in England, visits to GPs jumped by 3.6 per cent in the days following a full moon, while another study conducted by the Finnish National Public Health institute also found that suicide rates mysteriously peaked around a new moon at the changes of seasons.

Indeed every aspect of human behaviour seems to be affected by the moon.

Italian research found that a greater number of babies were born during the two days after a full moon than during any other two-day period in the month. Gout has been shown to be bone-achingly difficult on the days of the full moon.

And what of "moon madness" - the notion that when a full moon falls, dogs will bite, thieves will plunder and axe murderers will go on the rampage?

"For years people blamed the full moon on violence, depression and other mental health problems," says Professor Ian Hickie, psychiatrist and director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute at the University of Sydney. "But what we're realising is that it's probably not the moon at all - but a change in the levels of lux - [the amount of visible light per square metre] that appears in the sky, particularly around change of season.

"In Australia when summer moves into autumn around Easter and when winter moves into spring around late September, there is a big change in the sky's luminescence. This generally coincides with a doubling of the rate in 'bipolar' episodes for people who are prone to the disorder, with the light changes a trigger for manic behaviour.

"However, because the skies are so brilliant, of course the full moon becomes more noticeable. So people tend to turn around and blame it on the moon.

"Seasonal changes can definitively affect our health, the effects of the moon itself are not so clearcut." "For every positive finding there is a negative one. We can't change the moon, [but] there are certainly much greater contributors to depression people can change - such as drug and alcohol dependence and failure to exercise or take medication." Hickie adds that for those sensitive to light changes, walking outside every morning for 20-30 minutes first thing, ideally between 6.30 and 8, can help.

"In mild to moderate depression, more than 50 per cent of cases report a dramatic improvement in moods and sleep just by doing this one thing."

Moon Babies

Time was quickly running out for Barbara Dean, who after eight years of trying to conceive, two heartbreaking miscarriages and five cycles of IVF, could still not bring home the bouncing baby she always yearned for.

"With miscarriages, many people tell you not to worry and you'll conceive again. But that is the worst thing they can say, because you don't want to hear that when you are still grieving for that baby," she says.

"I had my last miscarriage in 2000 and then decided to go down the IVF path - which put us \$11,000 out of pocket.

"But I wasn't really worried about the money. It was more the fact that I was hitting 37 and still didn't have a child." Barbara and her husband, Stewart, then decided to visit fertility expert Francesca Naish. They believe that charting Barbara's menstrual cycle against the lunar biorhythmic cycle - along with herbs, vitamins and dietary changes - is the reason why Cianan, 11 months, is here today.

Lunar advocates claim that the moon and fertility are closely linked. Clams, for instance, open and close to phases of the moon, and the numbers of male sperm have been shown to increase when the moon is at the same phase it was in at the man's birth.

"In women, the theory is that the phase of the moon you were born under is another time that you can increase your chances of fertility, outside the standard mid-cycle ovulation," Barbara Dean says.

"This also explains how some women can fall pregnant when they only ever had sexual intercourse that month during a period. In fact that happened to a friend of mine."

She says that after vigilantly charting her natural and lunar cycles, she discovered there was one time in the six months she had been seeing Naish when her natural ovulation cycle and lunar biorhythmic peak fell simultaneously.

"That was the month I fell pregnant with Cianan," she says.

"Of course many other factors were involved - the herbs, the healthy diet and I was so busy that month focusing on moving house and our overseas trip that I was relaxed enough to let it happen. Nevertheless I do think the moon played a role in our little miracle."

But according to Dr Gino Pecoraro, spokesman for the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, there's no science to back moon babies.

"It was probably coincidence. A healthy, relaxed lifestyle and decreasing stress is known to aid ovulation by decreasing the level of the stress hormone, cortisol, which can inhibit ovulation. "A few studies show increase in delivery rates at times in the lunar cycle, [but] there simply isn't any strong and reliable scientific evidence to support the theory the "moon cycles" can affect fertility."