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Will it be a

BOY or a GIRL?



Great minds have worked for centuries to answer this question for curious parents; will there ever be a satisfactory solution?

by ALAN F. GUTTMACHER, M.D. Obstetrician and Gynecologist-in-Chief, Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City

WILL IT BE a boy or a girl? I'm sure the cave woman asked this of the club wielding mate. Women have been asking it ever since—and generally getting just as unsatisfactory answers as they did eons ago.

I've always been curious about this focus of parental curiosity, and some years ago I questioned 50 mothers-to-be about how they could tell whether they were going to have a boy or a girl. Here's what I heard:

If the baby kicks on the right side, it will be a boy; if it kicks on the left, a girl. If the pregnancy is carried "high," it'll be a boy; if "low," a girl. When a patient loses her hair during pregnancy, it will be a girl; but if the hair grows luxuriously, it will be a boy. If the patient develops a craving for sweet food, it will be a girl; sour food indicates a boy.

All this folklore—and that's all it is—dates back centuries. No symptom or sign can foretell the sex of the unborn. Obviously, any supposed sign will be correct half the time. And when coincidence results in seven correct guesses in a row—well, a new "discovery" is passed on to the world. What people forget is that even when a penny is tossed in the air, in a certain proportion of efforts, seven heads or seven tails will appear in succession.

Yet through the ages man has tried to find a way to predict the sex of unborn children. The earliest attempt is recorded in a famous Egyptian medical papyri written some 4,000 years ago and found with a mummy, perhaps that of the proud scientist who first offered it to anxious Egyptian mothers-to-be.

He advised them to water "wheat and spelt (a wheat-like grain) . . . in two bags. If the wheat grows, it will be a boy; if the spelt grows, it will be a girl."

As far as I know, no modern scientist has attempted to check the accuracy of this ancient test. Still, it couldn't be any further off the track than some of the ones that have been checked.

I don't know why, but most other methods which have come down through history concern phenomena which affect the right or left side of the pregnant woman's body. If the sign occurred on the right side, the seers predicted a boy, and if it happened on the left, a girl. Perhaps these ideas originated because the male is ordinarily stronger than the female, and the right side is ordinarily stronger than the left.

Even Hippocrates, the first great physician of antiquity, wrote, "if the right breast be harder and firmer, it is a sign the woman is with child of a boy. Again, she that goeth with a boy hath the right side of her belly bigger."

He also offers other evidence. "The male child lyeth high above the navall . . . and the female at the bottom of the belly.

They which be with childe of a boy are more quick and nimble in all their actions, and be in better healthe."

A medieval authority told women, "A woman with child of a boy . . . will reach out her right hand rather than her left and in going she will alwaies set forth the right foot foremost; the right eye is greater, brighter, and more sparkling . . ."

I wonder what happened when she carried boy and girl twins! She must have had a confusing time not knowing which foot or hand to start off with!

Jacques Guillemeau wrote "The Happy Delivery of Women" in 1609 with this addition to history and old-wives' tales: Livia, the empress of Rome, was so eager to know whether she would bear the future emperor or a mere princess that "she took an egg from under a hen, and kept it warm so long in her hands, till at last a cock-chicken was hatched . . . whereby shee knew shee should have a sonne."

She did, too! He was the Emperor Tiberius. Lucky Livia!

SO THROUGH the centuries, nature had guarded the riddle of unborn sex very well. In 1953, modern science did discover a method of solving it, but an impractical one.

When prepared with various dyes and studied under a high-powered microscope, the body cells of the male and female appear different. A high proportion of female cells contain an extra little package of staining material within the nucleus (so-called sex chromatin) which male cells lack.

Since skin cells from the baby peel off and float in the amniotic fluid which surrounds the baby in the uterus, one only has to study a sample of this fluid in order to determine the sex of the child.

But the only time this can be done is after the membranes rupture and the amniotic fluid drains forth from the mouth of the womb. Rupture of the membranes usually precedes birth by several minutes or several hours, occasionally several weeks. I suppose if one must know, under these circumstances, a proper gun salute can be ordered minutes or days ahead of a baby's birth.

From the third or fourth month, one can also thrust a needle through the mother's abdominal wall into the uterus and draw out a little amniotic fluid for cell study. But this presents some danger for both mother and baby, and I hardly think such an operation is justified merely to satisfy curiosity.

So for practical purposes, the old German adage still holds true: "When the child is delivered, when it lies upon a cushion, and not before, can we tell whether it is a boy or a girl."