

Waiting for Baby

Conception a conundrum for some couples

TEXT BY KEITH GILLOGLY

When couples decide to have a baby, they are anxious to conceive and bring a new life into their families. They don't anticipate fertility issues. However, 15 percent of couples are diagnosed with infertility problems in the United States. Though either partner could experience fertility issues, couples shouldn't lose hope. There are a range of medical resources and services across Oregon to help couples understand infertility and conceive their own baby.

Dr. Julie King, a gynecologist and head of the Medford Women's Clinic Fertility Program, recommends that healthy couples attempt conception for a year before seeking medical assistance. However, for prospective mothers over 35 years old, King says couples may want to reach out sooner, as there is reduced fertility and greater likelihood of miscarriage or chromosomal problems past that age.

History and mystery behind female infertility

Infertility in women is sometimes deemed unexplainable or multifactorial. Forty percent of cases involve women who don't ovulate due to hormonal reasons, King says. Obesity can also complicate fertility, especially when it's coupled with polycystic ovary syndrome, or PCOS, an endocrine system disorder affecting the ovaries and menstruation. Endometriosis, another relatively common issue affecting fertility, occurs when the tissue inside the uterus grows outside of the uterus and can cause menstrual pain. Tubal factor infertility, in which an egg can't properly traverse the fallopian tube to the uterus, accounts for 20 percent of female infertility, King says.

While genetics and other gynecological issues can affect fertility, a woman's history often indicates potential difficulties. "An irregular cycle, a painful cycle, a history of sexually transmitted diseases—those things can potentially cause an infertility issue or sub-fertility issue," King says, adding that sub-fertility describes a woman with fertility issues but who isn't incapable of having her own child. King advises that women with problematic histories undergo a preconception consultation and seek help earlier if having trouble conceiving.



Examinations for women

A fertility examination for women usually starts with verifying the number of eggs present, King says. An ultrasound may also be conducted to ensure structural normalcy. The thyroid hormone can interfere with ovulation and fertility, so that may be checked, and the fallopian tubes are examined to see if they're open and functional. Insurance, however, will not always cover fertility exams — including both men's and women's — so make sure to discuss costs. For women, exams for related gynecological issues may be covered, but fertility tests may not be.

Tests for men

After a patient-history and physical exam, a semen analysis is the next step for men.

"Don't just get one; you want to get two," says Dr. Jack Lewis, a urologist with Rogue Valley Urology. At least two analyses and usually more, are necessary in order to properly compare semen samples, he says. Men must be abstinent 48 hours before the test, and the sample needs to reach a lab within an hour, preferably within 30 minutes. In a container, sperm die off quickly, Lewis says. Analyses measure semen volume along with the number of sperm cells and the percentage that are motile, or actually moving, among other factors. Normally 40–60 percent are motile, Lewis says.

Fertility factors for men

In men, hormonal imbalances or structural problems with the testicles can cause infertility. Personal history and lifestyle influences can also play a role. Use of marijuana and other drugs can decrease sperm function, as can radiation exposure and chemotherapy drugs, Lewis says. Commonly, men who have used testosterone supplements and steroids will have fertility problems, because the additional testosterone shrinks and shuts down the testes. Also, because the testes are temperature sensitive, obesity and even too much time spent in hot tubs and saunas can negatively affect function. Men who have had hernia repairs can experience fertility issues caused by blockage from scarring in the vas deferens, which helps propel the sperm during ejaculation.

While a common impediment for women, age shouldn't be a fertility factor for men. "If you're virile at a young age, you should be virile at an older age too," Lewis says. While less common, some men do not produce sperm or have rare forms of infertility detectable with a physical exam. Doctors may recommend oral supplements, such as coenzyme Q10, to boost sperm motility or Clomid, to increase sperm count.

Strategies and solutions

King recommends using an ovulation kit so women know when they will be most fertile, and men know when they will be most effective. One common misconception, according to King, relates to prescription birth control. Women often think they need to stop taking the pill long before trying to conceive, so as to clear it from their systems. In fact, some women are more fertile in the first three to six months after quitting the pill, especially if they used it to help control endometriosis or PCOS.

For women, doctors sometimes advise relatively inexpensive and lower risk medications such as Clomid and Femara to help spur or regulate ovulation. If still unsuccessful, artificial insemination procedures, such as intrauterine insemination (IUI), are sometimes the next step. IUI involves placing the sperm directly into the uterus at the same time the ovary has released an egg.

Finally, so long as both partners can produce capable gametes, in vitro fertilization can be performed. The egg is fertilized outside of the body and then implanted in the uterus of the mother or into that of a surrogate mother. ■

INFERTILITY RESOURCES

The anticipation of having a child is one of life's greatest joys, and when couples can't conceive, it can be crushing. "If they can't have kids, it's a huge emotional burden," Lewis says.

King says couples can even go through the stages of loss when having fertility issues and that a well-trained counselor is the best asset.

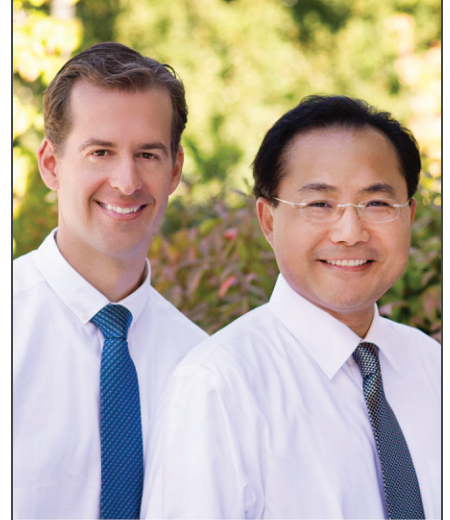
RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association, www.resolve.org, is an organization that fosters infertility awareness, education and care services and hosts support groups around Oregon and many other states. Oregon is also home to several specialized, top fertility treatment centers, in addition to the Medford Women's Clinic and Rogue Valley Urology. In Portland, Oregon Reproductive Medicine has a fertility center specializing in genomic medicine, safe surrogacy, and in vitro fertilization, among other areas. The Oregon Health and Science University and its Center for Women's Health provides a range of fertility and reproductive endocrinology treatments, as well as sperm and egg donor options.



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