

INFERTILITY PROBLEMS IN WOMEN



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

The inability to become pregnant after 1 year of sexual activity without contraception. Infertility occurs in 10 to 15% of all couples. Female fertility depends on normal functioning of the reproductive tract and the production of hormones necessary for normal sexual development and functioning. About 40 to 50% of all infertility is attributed to the female.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Inability to conceive.

CAUSES

- Anatomic abnormalities of the reproductive system.
- Emotional stress.
- Repeated weight-gain/weight-loss cycles.
- Hormone dysfunction, especially thyroid disorders.
- Vaginitis.
- Disorders of the cervix, such as infection, laceration or tearing from previous childbirth or narrowing of the cervical opening for any reason.
- Amenorrhea (lack of menstrual periods) caused by strenuous exercise programs or nutritional disorders (bulimia or anorexia nervosa).
- Chemical changes in the cervical mucus.
- Ovarian cysts.
- Endometriosis.
- Smoking.
- Tumors.
- The use of some medications, including oral contraceptives (e.g., Depo-Provera). A large number of women cannot conceive for many months after discontinuing use.
- Intrauterine device (IUD) (possibly).
- Disorders probably not related to infertility include: a tilted uterus; small fibroid tumors of the uterus; or inability to achieve sexual orgasm.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Stress.
- Diabetes mellitus.
- Marital discord and infrequent sexual intercourse.
- Smoking.
- Genital disorders.
- Drugs of abuse, such as heroin.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Obtain treatment for any treatable disorder that causes infertility.
- Avoid preventable causes of infertility.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

- Some fertility problems are minor and reversible. Approach treatment with optimism.
- Research into this area is offering new options to couples.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Psychological distress, including feelings of guilt, inadequacy and loss of self-esteem.
- Treatment costs are high and often not covered by insurance.
- The unknown and possible long-term effects of medications used to increase fertility.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests may include laboratory blood tests; pelvic examination; hysterosalpingogram (x-ray study of the genital tract); postcoital test (PCT), which is a study of the cervical mucus performed 2 to 12 hours after intercourse; endometrial biopsy to rule out luteal phase defect (a defect in hormone production) and possibly others.
- Surgical diagnostic procedures, such as laparoscopy (use of a small lighted telescope) to examine reproductive organs.
- Psychotherapy or counseling, if marital problems exist.
- Surgery to correct any reproductive system abnormalities.
- Keep a basal body-temperature chart to become familiar with your ovulation pattern. Have intercourse just before ovulation, which can be determined from the chart.
- Don't use a lubricant during sexual relations. Lubricants may interfere with sperm mobility.
- Your partner should withdraw his penis quickly from your vagina after ejaculation. If left in, it reduces the number of sperm that can swim toward the egg.
- After your partner's ejaculation, place pillows under your buttocks to provide an easier downhill swim for the sperm.
- Maintain a positive attitude. Worry and tension may contribute to infertility.
- Alternate pregnancy methods include in-vitro fertilization (IVF) in which eggs from the female are harvested, impregnated with sperm from the male, and implanted in the uterus; GIFT or ZIFT (gamete or zygote intrafallopian transfer) which are implant procedures involving female egg and male sperm; and intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), whereby a single sperm is injected into a single egg and the resulting zygote is transferred to the uterus.
- Additional information available from the Fertility Research Foundation, 1430 Second Avenue, Suite 103, New York, NY 10021, (212) 744-5500 or American Fertility Society, 1209 Montgomery Hwy., Birmingham, AL 35216-2809, (205) 978-5000.

MEDICATION

- Hormones for a hormone imbalance.
- Gonad stimulants such as clomiphene, menotropins (Pergonal), human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), leuprolide (Lupron) or urofollitropin. Recognize that fertility drugs may cause multiple births.

ACTIVITY

Exercise moderately. Overexercising may contribute to infertility.

DIET

Eat a normal, well-balanced diet. If you are overweight, try to achieve your ideal weight.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member is concerned about infertility.
- Conception does not occur within 6 months, despite recommendations and treatment.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Hormones used in treatment may produce side effects.