

## Infertility and Your Options

Infertility is usually defined as not being able to get pregnant despite trying for one year. A broader view of infertility includes not being able to carry a pregnancy to term and have a baby. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, infertility affects about 6.1 million American women, aged 15-44.

Pregnancy is the result of a chain of events involving a number of steps. While these steps may seem simple, many things can happen to prevent pregnancy from occurring. Read more to learn about the possible causes of infertility and the options that may be available to you. As always, consult with your doctor to discuss your individual situation.

### Causes of Infertility

About one third of infertility cases are due to problems with the man and one third are due to problems with the woman. Other cases are due to a combination of male and female factors or to unknown causes.

Infertility in men is often caused by problems with making sperm or getting the sperm to reach the egg. Problems with sperm may exist from birth or develop later in life due to illness or injury. Some men produce no sperm, or produce too few sperm. A common problem is called varicocele, which occurs when the veins on a man's testicle are too large and the heat from the enlarged veins affects the count and shape of sperm. Lifestyle can influence the number and quality of a man's sperm, and alcohol and drugs (including marijuana, nicotine and certain medications) can temporarily reduce sperm quality.

In women, most infertility can be linked to problems with ovulation. Without ovulation, eggs are not available to be fertilized. Signs of problems with ovulation include irregular menstrual periods or no periods. Simple lifestyle factors (including stress, diet or athletic training) can affect a woman's hormonal balance. Much less often, a hormonal imbalance from a serious medical problem (such as a pituitary gland tumor) can cause ovulation problems.

Age is also an important factor in female infertility. The ability of a woman's ovaries to produce eggs declines with age, especially after age 35. About one third of couples where the woman is over 35 will have problems with fertility.

Other problems can also lead to infertility in women. If the fallopian tubes are blocked at one or both ends, the egg cannot travel through the tubes into the uterus. Blocked tubes may result from pelvic inflammatory disease, endometriosis, or surgery for an ectopic pregnancy.

### Testing for Infertility

If you have been trying to have a baby without success, you may want to seek medical help. If you are over 35, or if you have reason to believe that there may be a fertility problem, you should not wait for one year of trying before seeing a health care provider. A medical evaluation may determine the reasons for a couple's infertility. Usually this process begins with physical exams and medical and sexual histories of both partners. If there is no obvious problem, like improperly timed intercourse or absence of ovulation, tests may be needed.

For a man, testing usually begins with tests of his semen to look at the number, shape and movement of his sperm. Sometimes other kinds of tests, such as hormone tests, are done.

For a woman, the first step in testing is to find out if she is ovulating each month. There are several ways to do this. For example, she can keep track of changes in her morning body temperature and in the texture of her cervical mucus. Another tool is a home ovulation test kit, which can be bought at drug or grocery stores.

Checks of ovulation can also be done in the doctor's office, using blood tests for hormone levels or ultrasound tests of the ovaries. If the woman is ovulating, more tests will need to be done.

## Treatment for Infertility

Depending on the test results, different treatments can be suggested. The majority of infertility cases are treated with drugs or surgery.

Various fertility drugs may be used for women with ovulation problems. It is important to talk with your health care provider about the drug that will be used. You should understand the drug's benefits and side effects. Depending on the type of fertility drug and the dosage of the drug used, multiple births (such as twins) can occur in some women.

If needed, surgery can be done to repair damage to a woman's ovaries, fallopian tubes or uterus. Sometimes a man has an infertility problem that can be corrected by surgery as well.

## Understanding Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART)

Assisted reproductive technology (ART) uses special methods to help infertile couples. ART involves handling both the woman's eggs and the man's sperm. Success rates vary and depend on many factors. ART can be expensive and time-consuming, but ART has made it possible for many couples to have children that otherwise would not have been conceived.

Some of the common ART methods include:

- In vitro fertilization (IVF) is often used when a woman's fallopian tubes are blocked or when a man has low sperm counts. A woman's eggs are removed and placed in a culture dish with the man's sperm for fertilization. If fertilization occurs, the fertilized eggs (embryos) are then placed in the woman's uterus.
- Gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT) is similar to IVF, but used when the woman has at least one normal fallopian tube. Three to five eggs are placed in the fallopian tube, along with the man's sperm, for fertilization inside the woman's body.
- Zygote intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT), also called tubal embryo transfer, combines IVF and GIFT. The eggs retrieved from the woman's ovaries are fertilized in the lab and placed in the fallopian tubes rather than the uterus.

ART procedures sometimes involve the use of donor eggs or previously frozen embryos. Donor eggs may be used if a woman has impaired ovaries or has a genetic disease that could be passed on to her baby.

If you have been trying to become pregnant but are having difficulties, or if you suspect you may have an infertility problem, talk to your doctor to discuss the options that may be available to you.

## Resources

- American Society for Reproductive Medicine: [www.asrm.org](http://www.asrm.org)
- National Infertility Association: [www.resolve.org](http://www.resolve.org)
- National Women's Health Information Center: [www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov)

Here when you need us.

Call: 877-314-5841

Online: [guidanceresources.com](https://guidanceresources.com)

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