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Having a baby… or not? Causes of and treatments for infertility

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(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

Having a baby is something many couples joyfully anticipate, but for some, that dream can be complicated by difficulty in conceiving. Infertility is defined as unprotected regular intercourse for one year without conception. It can be heartbreaking and frustrating to be disappointed month after month. On average, 10 to 15 percent of couples in the United States experience infertility, however about 60 to 70 percent of couples who are treated for infertility will eventually have a child.

"Infertility can be a result of problems with the female or male, and in many cases it is a result of problems with both. Some common reasons for male infertility could be a result of a low sperm count, low sperm mobility, abnormally shaped sperm and problems with ejaculation," says Dr. Rachel A. McConnell (http://www.columbiaobgyn.org/doctor/rachel-a-mcconnell#.VvGrpMLSmig), an OB/GYN with ColumbiaDoctors, the faculty practice of Columbia University Medical Center, in both Scarsdale and New York City. "Some new studies have shown that in 40 percent of infertile couples, the male is the cause of infertility. Common reasons for female infertility include blockage of the fallopian tube (egg is not able to travel to the uterus), and damage to the uterine cavity (implantation of the embryo cannot occur). Also, women who are older will have difficulty getting pregnant due to decreased egg count and quality."

Another common cause of infertility is hormones. Problems of the thyroid, pituitary and hypothalamus can result in hormonal imbalances manifesting in irregular periods that can interfere with ovulation. Some women may have a hormonal imbalance called Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), which is associated with anovulation — a failure of the ovary to release eggs. "Women who have this condition are at a higher risk for a miscarriage," notes Dr. McConnell. "Also older women are at a higher risk of having a miscarriage due to the fetus having an abnormal number of chromosomes (aneuploidy). Women who have had more than one miscarriage should be seen by an infertility specialist/reproductive endocrinologist for treatment.

Infertility may be temporary, especially in cases of hormonal imbalance. When they are medically corrected, future pregnancies can occur naturally. Sometimes, couples with unexplained infertility will conceive with or without treatment or assistance. Irreversible cases of infertility may be a result of blocked fallopian tubes, certain genetic conditions and damage to reproductive systems from severe scarring.

Fertility trends and options

Sometimes infertility can be treated with medication or surgical repair of reproductive organs. Another option is in vitro fertilization or IVF, where the woman's eggs are surgically removed from the ovaries, mixed with sperm outside the body, and allowed to fertilize before the embryo is then transferred back into the uterus. "The chances of pregnancy are greatly increased using IVF," says Dr. McConnell. Donor eggs are another option, especially for older women. While some women may be uncomfortable with the idea of using another woman's eggs, couples need to carefully weigh whether their desire to have a baby is stronger than the genetic components that make it possible.

"Egg freezing has been offered to women diagnosed with cancer. And now, women who want or need to delay childbearing due to education goals, careers and other personal matters are inquiring about this procedure," says Dr. McConnell. "Women who are in their prime reproductive years (20s and early 30s) should have discussions with their gynecologist about tests that can help them assess their ovarian reserve and discuss options if or when they should consider egg freezing.

A small percentage of couples still experience infertility even after treatment. If a woman has been trying to conceive for one year or more, she should consider having an infertility consultation. If a woman is 35 years or older, she should begin infertility testing after six months of trying to conceive. If there are underlying medical problems, she should seek care earlier than six months. "The most significant words of encouragement that can be given to a couple trying to conceive would be to not give up and not lose hope," says Dr. McConnell. "If you are feeling anxious or depressed about the inability to conceive, seek infertility counseling. Resources are available, including help from the physician and referral to trained professionals."

For more information, visit nyp.org/lawrence (http://www.nyplawrence.org/Programs-Services/Medical-Services/Obstetrics-and-Gynecology.aspx) or call 914-787-5000 to find a physician.