

PREGNANCY

Finding A Way Out

More couples are opting to start a family at a later age and this delay has proven to be a challenge for some older couples that are trying to conceive. We provide answers to your questions on in vitro fertilisation.

Technology has changed the way couples start families. While the advances in science have helped shed the stigma linked to contemporary methods of conception, there are still several pressing topics on the issue that remain questioned.

There has been an increasing growth in the number of couples opting for in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Dr Seng Shay Way, consultant obstetrician-gynaecologist at Raffles Fertility Centre and Raffles Women's Centre shed the light on the main concerns of IVF and its success rate.

THE ROLE OF IVF

Couples that want to start a family at a later age may face problems with declining quality and quantity of eggs, which leads to difficulty in conception. IVF can assist in making this process efficient and less time consuming. However, do not expect fertility treatment to rewind the 'biological clock'. Many are upset when they find out they can't have babies. Demand for IVF from older women is rising dramatically, but they don't realise the chances of success are limited. Latest research shows success rates for women aged 42 and over had stayed static at less than 10 per cent.

BENEFITS

IVF helps patients who would be otherwise unable to conceive. The ultimate advantage of IVF is achieving a successful pregnancy and a healthy baby. Medical conditions for IVF include the following.

- **Blocked tubes:** For women with blocked or damaged fallopian tubes, IVF provides the best opportunity of having a child using their own eggs
- **Older patients or patients with a low ovarian reserve:** IVF can be used to maximise the chance of older patients conceiving
- **Male infertility:** Couples with a male infertility problem will have a much higher chance of conceiving with IVF than conceiving naturally
- **Unexplained infertility:** 1 in 6 couples will suffer infertility problems and sometimes these remain undiagnosed after investigation. These patients may benefit from intervention
- **PCOS:** Polycystic ovary syndrome is common condition in which there is a hormone imbalance leading to irregular menstrual cycles. IVF has proved very successful in patients with PCOS, who will not respond appropriately to fertility medication in isolation
- **Endometriosis:** Patients with endometriosis, where parts of the womb lining grow outside the womb, may like to try IVF, as it has proved successful in this group
- **Premature ovarian failure:** Women with premature ovarian failure or menopause can have IVF treatment using donor eggs, which typically has high success rates

RISKS & SIDE EFFECTS

- IVF can result in **undesired multiple births** i.e. delivery of more than one baby. This is more likely in IVF treatment than naturally. Clinics and doctors tend

to transfer more than one embryo in the womb so that the chance of a successful delivery is higher. In Singapore the maximum number of embryos we can replace is two per transfer.

IVF can result in **Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome**. In IVF, ovaries are stimulated to produce more than one high quality eggs. The hormones and drugs used to stimulate the ovaries can have side effects leading to condition called ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome.

Ectopic pregnancy: IVF can lead to Ectopic pregnancy in which the pregnancy occurs outside the uterus.

IVF success rates are **much lower than 100 per cent**. IVF success rate depends on various factors like the age of female, quality of eggs, quality of sperms, and quality of uterus. The success rate decreases with the age of female partner.

Painful: The drugs and hormones used during the IVF procedure can be painful.

Costly: IVF treatment can be a costly affair. Since success rate is low, couples are usually required to go through multiple cycles (or multiple attempts) adding to the cost of the treatment.

RISK OF POSSIBLE BIRTH DEFECTS

Recently a paper reported a slightly higher risk of four per cent of babies born via assisted reproductive technology such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) might have major birth defects. But these risks are not much different from what would be expected in the general population. It is

still not clear whether the connection between IVF and increased health risks is due to the couple's underlying fertility issues rather than some aspect of the fertility treatment itself. For example a man who is infertile tends to have more sperm that are chromosomally abnormal. Consequently, even though medical technology can make it possible for him to conceive a child, he carries a higher risk of passing on a problem to that child. Fertility patients also tend to be older, which means they have a greater chance of having a child with a birth defect, no matter what type of conception. The risks are about the same that you take getting pregnant at home. **PW**

