

## MERCK

### Busting the myths around infertility

#### **Myth: Infertility is purely a women's problem**

**Fact:** Infertility can affect men and women alike.<sup>1b</sup> 20-30% of infertility cases are explained by physiological causes in men.<sup>2b</sup> Infertility can affect men of all ages; however, in their mid-to-late 40s, men experience changes in their sperm that can cause issues with fertility and chromosomal/developmental problems with offspring.<sup>1b</sup>

#### **Myth: Healthy young adults don't have to worry about infertility**

**Fact:** The current prevalence of infertility lasting for at least 12 months is estimated to affect between 8 to 12% worldwide of women aged 20 to 44, which indicates that infertility can affect one at any age.<sup>2a</sup>

#### **Myth: Deciding to have a baby only when you are much older won't affect your fertility**

**Fact:** A woman's age is one of the most important factors affecting whether she is able to conceive and give birth to a healthy child.<sup>1a</sup>

This is due to several changes that are a natural part of ageing:<sup>1a</sup>

- The number and quality of eggs (ovarian reserve) decreases naturally and progressively from the time a woman is born until the time she reaches menopause. This decline is gradual until her early 30s but accelerates quickly after her mid-30s.<sup>1a</sup>
- It is not only more difficult to get pregnant, but miscarriage and chromosomal abnormalities in the child (such as Down syndrome) are more common in older mothers.<sup>1a</sup>
- Fibroids, endometriosis, and tubal disease are more common and can affect fertility.<sup>1a</sup>
- Women who become pregnant at an older age have a higher risk of complications during the pregnancy, such as gestational diabetes and preeclampsia (high blood pressure).<sup>1a</sup>
- If the woman is older than 35, she and her partner should seek evaluation if they have not been able to conceive after six months.<sup>1c</sup>

#### **Myth: Only women older than 35 should get a fertility evaluation.**

**Fact:** A woman younger than 35 should ask for a fertility evaluation if she and her partner have not been able to conceive after one year of trying (unprotected intercourse).<sup>1c</sup>

#### **Myth: Only age causes a decline in fertility**

**Fact:** If you have any of the following risk factors and you're wanting to conceive but have not been successful, you should consider seeking fertility advice early:<sup>1d</sup>

- Family history (mother or sister) of early menopause (before age 51)<sup>1d</sup>
- History of cigarette smoking in either partner<sup>1d</sup>
- Previous ovarian surgery<sup>1d</sup>
- Exposure to chemotherapy or radiation to treat cancer in either partner<sup>1d</sup>
- Shortening in the time between periods<sup>1d</sup>
- Skipped or missed periods<sup>1d</sup>
- History of injury to the testicles<sup>1d</sup>
- Exposure to toxic chemicals (certain pesticides or solvents)<sup>1d</sup>
- If a couple has an obvious medical problem affecting their ability to conceive, such as absence of periods (amenorrhoea) or irregular periods, sexual dysfunction, a history of pelvic disease, or prior surgery, they should begin the infertility evaluation immediately.<sup>1d</sup>

#### **Myth: It's possible to slow down reproductive ageing**

**Fact:** It's not possible. However, eating well, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, avoiding smoking, and adopting a lifestyle that reduces stress can improve your overall health.<sup>1g</sup> Studies suggest that smoking, diet, and stress may have an impact on the quality of eggs/sperm and may accelerate menopause.<sup>1g</sup> Changes in lifestyle and exposure can show in the quality of sperm within a few months.<sup>1g</sup>

- Unlike men, a woman is born with all her eggs, so there are no methods/treatments to grow more or new eggs or preserve the quality of those eggs that remain.<sup>1g</sup>

- That is why it's important to talk about family planning with a healthcare provider even if you are not thinking about getting pregnant right away.<sup>19</sup> This might decrease the chance of having difficulties later.<sup>19</sup>

**Myth: Infertility is rare**

**Fact:** Infertility is more prevalent than you might think.

- Infertility has been recognised as a public health issue worldwide by the World Health Organisation (WHO).<sup>3a</sup>
- One in six couples worldwide experience some form of infertility problem at least once during their reproductive lifetime.<sup>2a</sup>
- The current prevalence of infertility lasting for at least 12 months is estimated to affect between 8–12 % worldwide of women aged 20–44.<sup>2a</sup>

**Myth: *In vitro* fertilisation (IVF) is the only fertility option available**

**Fact:** IVF currently accounts for more than 99 % of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) procedures.<sup>4a</sup> In IVF, eggs are surgically removed from the ovary and mixed with sperm outside the body in a Petri dish.<sup>4a</sup> After about 40 hours, the eggs are examined to see if they have become fertilised by the sperm and are dividing into cells.<sup>4a</sup> These fertilised eggs (embryos) are then placed in the woman's uterus, thus bypassing the fallopian tubes.<sup>4a</sup>

However, other options are available:

- Men and women who want to delay having a child until their late 30s or early 40s may consider methods to preserve their fertility.<sup>1i</sup> One way is to freeze sperm, eggs, or embryos.<sup>1i</sup>
- In men, sperm collection is usually a quick, non-invasive, simple process and cryopreservation of sperm is well established.<sup>1i</sup>
- A woman must undergo egg retrieval like in IVF. Embryo freezing is well established and generally more successful than freezing unfertilised eggs, but it requires that the woman have a male partner or use donor sperm.<sup>1i</sup>
- The only other option for men and women who are already infertile is to use sperm, eggs, or embryos donated by another man, woman, or couple.<sup>1i</sup> Using donated gametes or embryos makes the chance of successful pregnancy the same as for the person who donated the gametes.<sup>1i</sup>

For more information about fertility, it's important to speak to your healthcare provider or a fertility specialist early to plan for your future reproductive health. Visit: [www.merckfertilityjourney.co.za](http://www.merckfertilityjourney.co.za) for further detailed information or to find a fertility clinic near to you.

**#WorldInfertilityMonth #DontDelay #Merck**

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