

Dr. Sharad - NST - 20.10.15

cover story **HEAL**

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Putting off having children may result in heartbreak later for some women.

SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE

If you're under 30 years old and healthy, one to two years of actively trying for a child without any result should be sufficient reason to seek medical advice. "Actively trying" is defined as unprotected intercourse about three to four times a week.

However, if you're a woman above 35, give yourself only three to six months before seeking treatment.

Dr Sharad Ratna says women who have "reproductive risk markers" such as painful or irregular periods, should also come earlier for investigation and treatment as such signs could point to problems like Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) or endometriosis, which can affect fertility.

Pelvic infections are also on the rise among young women below 30 and it can also affect fertility. "Infections like chlamydia and gonorrhoea can cause tubal damage, and often it's going

undetected and untreated until these women decide to have children."

Dr Sharad adds that young women should not assume that having a regular pap smear and being given the "all clear" is a sign that their fertility is well and good. One's fertility has nothing to do with getting a normal result on a pap smear.

In fact, a woman could have a normal result for years but be living with an underlying fertility issue.

While the pap smear is effective for detecting the HPV virus and cervical cancer, it cannot indicate whether there's a defect with a woman's ovaries or fallopian tubes, for example. There are other methods of testing and investigation specifically for fertility.

"If you have a blocked tube or there's something wrong with your womb, it's not something a pap smear can pick up and women should be aware of that."

DECLINING FERTILITY

As a woman ages, her fertility also declines due to age-related changes that occur in the ovaries.

While men continue to produce sperm throughout their lives, women are born with all the egg-containing follicles they will ever have.

At birth, there are about one million follicles. By puberty this will drop to about 300,000 and of the follicles remaining at puberty, only about 300 will be ovulated during the reproductive years.

Source: Age and Fertility: A Guide For Patients Revised 2012 - American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

IVF SUCCESS RATES BY AGE

Below 30: 40-50 per cent
 Less than 35: 32 per cent
 35-37: 28 per cent
 38-39: 21 per cent
 40-42: 14 per cent
 Above 42: five per cent
 Above 45: nearly zero

*These figures have geographical variations and may also vary from one fertility centre to another.

Source: American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

patient seem to improve outcomes."

Research also indicates better success rates with the shorter IVF protocol, where patients are subjected to 10 days of hormonal injections rather than the earlier longer protocol in which they had to undergo about a month of daily injections to stimulate the ovaries for egg production.

Through a process called vitrification, which involves rapid freezing, woman can also choose to preserve their embryos when they are most fertile and these embryos are less likely to be destroyed or damaged during the thawing process.

Egg freezing is also an option for young women who want to preserve their fertility and use it at a later point in life through IVF. However, egg freezing is complex and costly, and doesn't offer women a guarantee of pregnancy and motherhood as advocated.

NO GUARANTEES

Neither does IVF. Despite all the developments in the field, it still cannot guarantee a baby for a woman when she wants it. Success is influenced primarily by the age of the patient, co-existing risk factors and the IVF centre where the treatment is done.

"A conservative figure for a young couple with no significant risk factors would be about 50 per cent per IVF cycle."

Celebrity mums may be getting over this hurdle by using eggs donated by much younger women or even turning to surrogate mothers to achieve a pregnancy.

For the average woman though, such options may be too expensive or even unappealing. As a result, the dream of late motherhood may just end in heartbreak.

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