

AGE vs. FERTILITY

by Tina Smith

The story is common. A young woman completes her education, focuses on a career and ends up marrying later in life. She doesn't begin to think about having children until her first milestone birthday.

What she may not realize is that after the age of 30, a woman only has a twenty percent chance of getting pregnant each month. Those odds decline to five percent by age 40. If fertility challenges other than age are involved, her odds could be even lower. The natural decline in fertility actually starts for women in their late 20s with more rapid decreases after age 35.

According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, the ability to conceive is adversely affected as hormone levels in both men's and women's bodies change with age.

Men continue to produce sperm throughout their lives in spite of decreasing testosterone levels and semen quality. Women, on the other hand, are born with all of their eggs, so the end of the supply also marks the end of fertile years. Additionally, eggs age along with the body, so the viability of remaining eggs lessens as the years pass. Older eggs are more prone to genetic abnormalities, and women over age 40 have increased risks for miscarriage.

Even though women today are healthier and taking better care of themselves than ever before, these advances do not offset the natural decline in fertility that comes with age, according to ASRM's *Age and Fertility* booklet. Some women believe they can delay starting a family and just use assisted reproduction technologies once they are ready, but age affects the success rates of infertility treatments as well as the natural ability to get pregnant.

"The key for couples who plan to have children later in life is awareness," says Dr. Joseph Bird of the Fertility Center in Chattanooga. "I've seen too many prospective parents completely caught off guard by the obstacles that age brings to fertility. Those who are prepared for what they are up against don't experience the same level of anxiety."

Diagnostic tests are available that can help evaluate both male and female fertility. Determining ovarian reserve assesses the number and quality of eggs in the ovaries as well as the body's response to hormone signals. Semen analyses show the number of sperm available while comparing the movement and shape of those sperm with normal fertility ranges.

As a general rule, couples not using contraception who have been trying to conceive for a year without success are encouraged to see a specialist. Women who are 35 or older need to initiate an evaluation as soon as possible. For some older women, conception will require using an egg donor, who agrees to give up her eggs from one menstrual cycle to be fertilized and then transferred to the recipient. Others may need a gestational surrogate, who carries and gives birth to a baby for another woman.

If you are older and struggling to get pregnant, don't assume that something is wrong with you or that you shouldn't try. Instead, recognize the forces of nature and be open to the possibility that having a baby may not be as easy as you dreamed. Educate yourself about testing and treatment options, and be realistic about your chances for success. Above all, don't wait too long before teaming up with a fertility doctor to achieve your goal of parenthood.

Tina Smith is a communications specialist who serves as the patient support coordinator for the Fertility Center on Gunbarrel Road in Chattanooga. She also facilitates the Empty Arms community support group, which meets twice each month and is free and open to all infertile women. Tina and her husband, Bo, spent 10 years dealing with infertility before conceiving through in vitro fertilization and giving birth to a healthy baby boy. Shortly afterwards, they welcomed a daughter from natural conception. Tina is committed to sharing information and resources while offering encouragement and hope to other women struggling to become moms.