

## **FIGHTING INFERTILITY**

by Tina Smith

Time. The unwelcome enemy of youthful complexions and boundless energy is also waging war against millions of men and women who've yet to become parents.

The seemingly simple process of making a baby actually requires all the right pieces in sequence. Both male and female factors can hinder or prevent conception – as can that ever-ticking biological clock. According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, infertility cases can be equally divided into three groups: male issues, female obstacles, and a combination of problems with both partners. In addition, about 20 percent of cases are unexplained with no known causes for infertility.

Low numbers of sperm as well as sperm with abnormal shapes and movements are the most common male infertility factors. These can prevent sperm from even reaching the eggs, let alone fertilizing. For women, ovulation irregularities and disorders cause the majority of infertility problems, but other hindrances include blocked fallopian tubes, uterine fibroids, and birth defects or conditions involving the structure of the uterus.

One out of every six couples in the United States cannot conceive or carry a child without medical help, yet many struggle to know when and how to pursue reproductive assistance. Nearly everyone expects and waits to experience natural conception; in fact, most couples take precautions to prevent pregnancy until they feel ready to start a family. Unfortunately, women in particular may miss opportunities for less-invasive infertility treatments because they don't seek help until after their egg quality begins diminishing.

A thirty-something female who responds well to fertility medications may not have the same reaction to those drugs five years down the road. This woman who could have used her own eggs for an in vitro fertilization procedure at age 30, for example, may only have success with the same procedure at age 35 if she uses donor eggs from another woman.

Partnering with a reproductive specialist can help couples fully explore their options and target the best approach for achieving pregnancy without wasting time that may be running out. By definition, infertility is the inability to conceive or carry a pregnancy after one year of unprotected sexual intercourse. The timing of that diagnosis is reduced to six months for men with a low sperm count as well as women over age 35 and those with a history of painful periods, irregular cycles, pelvic inflammatory disease or miscarriage.

Along with advancing age, limited finances can be an obstacle for couples who want to pursue infertility treatments. Some insurance companies offer coverage for diagnostic testing, while a few provide assistance for actual procedures and treatments. Couples may be surprised to find they qualify for partial or even more extensive coverage once benefits are verified. Financial assistance partners – such as Advanced Patient Financing ([www.apfusa.com](http://www.apfusa.com)), Advanced Reproductive Care ([www.arcfertility](http://www.arcfertility)) and Care Credit ([www.carecredit.com](http://www.carecredit.com)) – are another alternative for covering the costs of testing and treatment.

Couples battling infertility typically experience high levels of anxiety. In fact, researchers are finding that the stress of infertility is similar to dealing with a life-threatening illness such as cancer or heart disease. The challenge is balancing resources and ethical convictions with physiological barriers and sometimes unknown roadblocks to fertility. The repetition of anticipation and disappointment for many pursuing assisted reproduction exacts a harsh price. Self-esteem and confidence take a hit, private issues become public knowledge, future plans are on hold, and relationships as well as marriages are severely tested. Having skilled professionals involved in the infertility process often helps couples feel less isolated and out of control.

Chattanooga is home to the only fertility clinic within a 100-mile radius of the downtown area. Patients travel from Alabama and Georgia as well as cities across Tennessee to consult with Reproductive Endocrinologists Joseph Bird and Barry Donesky at the Fertility Center on Gunbarrel Road, which also operates a satellite office in Knoxville. Since 1994, these doctors and their embryologists have partnered with couples longing to have children but unable to find success on their own.

Over more than a decade, the Fertility Center has secured a reputation for blending expertise and compassion. Patients are known by name, and the staff is committed to helping every person feel valued and taken care of in spite of the clinical and invasive nature of assisted reproduction. At the same time, the Fertility Center stays on the cutting edge of technology and remains open to finding new ways to help more couples get pregnant. The clinic also offers solutions to men and women struggling with hormone imbalances and fertility preservation options to cancer victims of all ages.

Currently, the Fertility Center is one of only a handful of clinics around the country that transfers embryos at the blastocyst stage – five days after retrieving eggs from a woman and adding sperm to those eggs in a laboratory (in vitro fertilization). For years, the general practice has been to transfer on day three, but better success rates are being documented when embryos are allowed to divide under incubation for an additional

two days before being transferred into a woman's uterus. By the fifth day, embryos are no longer living off egg reserves, so the strongest and most viable embryos can be chosen for transfer. This incredible attention to detail allows for fewer embryos to be transferred while still achieving pregnancy success, which in turn lowers the rate of triplets and helps patients avoid the complications that can be associated with multiples.

Log on to [MyFertilityCenter.com](http://MyFertilityCenter.com) for more information about infertility and available resources through the Fertility Center's new website, which opened up in January this year. Check out tips for improving fertility, baby-making alternatives, test-tube tidbits, a glossary of terms, success stories, and answers to many of your questions. The SUPPORT CENTRAL section offers website links, recommended books, articles about reducing stress, and details about the free Empty Arms community support group for infertile women – all designed to help lighten the load for those who still dream of being called “mommy and daddy” someday.

*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 the infertile.*

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## **Do-It-Yourself Fertility Tips**

### **(egg) Take prenatal vitamins**

Ask your gynecologist or family doctor to write you a prescription for prenatal vitamins. Start taking them as soon as possible to help prepare your body for conception and balance out nutrition deficiencies. You'll be healthier and stronger as a result.

### **(sperm) Take Vitamins C & E**

Studies have proven that daily supplements of vitamin C (1,000 mg) and vitamin E (400 units) can improve sperm counts, motility and speed. The longer these vitamins are taken, the better the documented results.

### **(sperm) Limit bicycling**

Moderate bike rides are fine, but intense cycling can cause unnecessary stress on the testicles. Cool and unrestricted environments are best for sperm production. Take frequent breaks while cycling and wear padded biking shorts.

### **(sperm) Avoid hot tubs**

Heat isn't a good thing for sperm, so keep your testicles out of hot water – literally! Also, don't keep a running computer on your lap for extended periods of time.

### **(egg and sperm) Avoid alcohol**

In general, the chances of successful conception seem to decrease as alcohol consumption increases. Drinking alcohol puts women at risk for ovulatory dysfunction, hormone imbalances and miscarriage. Alcohol abuse also has been linked to pre-term birth, stillbirth and impaired fetal growth and development in babies. For men, alcohol consumption can result in abnormal liver function and a rise in estrogen levels, which may interfere with sperm development and hormone levels. The toxins in alcohol can kill off the sperm-generating cells in the testicle.

### **(egg and sperm) No tobacco**

Smoking is a definite no-no for anyone trying to conceive a child, and second-hand smoke has been found to be equally detrimental to fertility. Components of smoke can concentrate in the follicles (developing eggs) of women and in the testicles of men, resulting in fewer numbers and lower quality of eggs and sperm available for fertilization. In addition to inhibiting ovarian function and prematurely aging the ovaries, smoking also can increase a woman's risk for ectopic (tubal) pregnancies as well as miscarriages. The sperm of men who smoke are slower and less apt to be shaped normally. Avoid all products containing nicotine, marijuana and other harmful drugs.

(egg and sperm) ***Avoid chemicals***

Environmental and occupational toxins – pesticides, additives, exhaust, paints, solvents and cosmetics, to name a few – are all around us and can't be completely eliminated. Just try to limit your exposure to things that might prove detrimental to your reproductive system. Ask one of our doctors if you have specific questions about chemicals you are exposed to on a regular basis.

(egg and sperm) ***Check prescriptions***

Read labels and talk with your doctors about any adverse effects your prescribed medications can have on fertility. Also consider the side effects of over-the-counter drugs that you take regularly.

(egg and sperm) ***Enjoy frequent sex***

Don't forget that intercourse is also a necessary part of conceiving a baby. Studies indicate that regular sex may help maintain regularity of the menstrual cycle. During the days just prior to ovulation, frequent sex also increases the chances of conception, so intercourse every 36 to 48 hours is sound fertility practice. Two or three days of abstinence allows sperm counts to build, but longer periods without sex actually can have a negative impact on fertility. Also guard against becoming too overwhelmed or distracted by your struggle with infertility or cancer or the stress of life to enjoy intimate moments as a couple.

(egg and sperm) ***Consult with a specialist***

If you've tried everything and still can't become pregnant, consider making an appointment with a reproductive endocrinologist to help you uncover the source of your infertility or help you preserve your fertility for the future. Tests can pinpoint problems, medications can improve fertility, and factors you've never even considered can come to light. Get the experts involved.