

What is Infertility?



Infertility is a condition of the reproductive system that impairs the conception of children. It affects approximately 6.1 million individuals throughout the United States. The diagnosis of infertility is usually given to couples who have been attempting to conceive for at least 1 year without success.

Conception and pregnancy are complicated processes that depend upon many factors: 1) the production of healthy sperm by the man; 2) healthy eggs produced by the woman; 3) unblocked fallopian tubes that allow the sperm to reach the egg; 4) the sperm's ability to fertilize the egg when they meet; 5) the ability of the fertilized egg (embryo) to become implanted in the woman's uterus; and 6) sufficient embryo quality.

Finally, for the pregnancy to continue to full term, the embryo must be healthy and the woman's hormonal environment adequate for its development. When just one of these factors is impaired, infertility can result.

Is infertility a woman's problem?

It is a common assumption that infertility is related to the woman, when in reality only one-third of infertility cases are related to the woman alone. One-third of infertility problems are related to men and the remaining one-third is made up of a combination of fertility factors between the couple or unknown causes. Unknown causes account for approximately twenty percent of infertility cases.

What causes infertility in men?

The most common male infertility factors include azoospermia (no sperm cells are produced) and oligospermia (few sperm cells are produced). Sometimes, sperm cells are malformed or they die before they can reach the egg. In rare cases, infertility in men is caused by a genetic disease such as cystic fibrosis or a chromosomal abnormality.

What causes infertility in women?

The most common female infertility factor is an ovulation disorder. Other causes of female infertility include blocked fallopian tubes, which can occur when a woman has had pelvic inflammatory disease or endometriosis. Congenital anomalies (birth defects) involving the structure of the uterus and uterine fibroids are associated with repeated miscarriages. Aging is also an important factor in female infertility. The ability for ovaries to produce eggs declines with age, especially after age 35.

When should someone get tested for infertility?

The American Society of Reproductive Medicine recommends that women under 35 begin testing after trying to conceive unsuccessfully for 12 months. The recommendation for women over 35 is to begin testing after trying to conceive for 6 months without success. Some couples or individuals find trying to conceive is more relaxed if they know that everything is OK to begin with.

How early can you get tested?

Couples may request that their health care provider conduct an exam to determine if everything is healthy and working correctly. It is also possible to use over-the-counter at home screening tests for evaluating ovarian function through testing kits like LH kits.

How is infertility diagnosed?

As noted, couples are generally advised to seek medical help if they are unable to achieve pregnancy after a year of unprotected intercourse. The doctor will conduct a physical examination of both partners to determine their general state of health and to evaluate physical disorders that may be causing infertility. Usually both partners are interviewed about their sexual habits in order to determine whether intercourse is taking place properly for conception.

If no cause can be determined at this point, more specific tests may be recommended. For women, these include an analysis of body temperature and ovulation, x-ray of the fallopian tubes and uterus, and laparoscopy. For men, initial tests focus on semen analysis.

How is infertility treated?

Approximately 85 to 90 percent of infertility cases are treated with conventional therapies, such as drug treatment or surgical repair of reproductive organs. Assisted reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization, account for the remaining infertility treatments.

What is in vitro fertilization?

For infertile couples in which the woman has blocked or absent fallopian tubes, or the man has a low sperm count, in vitro fertilization (IVF) offers the chance of biological parenthood to couples.

In IVF, eggs are surgically removed from the ovary and mixed with sperm outside the body in a Petri dish ("in vitro" is Latin for "in glass"). After about 40 hours, the eggs are examined to see if they have become fertilized by the sperm and are dividing into cells. These fertilized eggs (embryos) are then placed in the women's uterus, by-passing the fallopian tubes.

Lily Liu

How can SEIMC help?

Dr. Lily Liu, PhD in Reproductive Medicine, has been offering consultation and treatment to our expatriate and local patients with infertility problems. Her 15 years of experience in obstetrics and gynecology has earned her good reputation with highly successful conception cases. She is providing two Assisted Reproduction packages from female and male health checkups to follicle retrieving, culture in vitro and embryo transfer.

Dr. Eva Zhang, Traditional Chinese Medicine advisor for the American Herbal Pharmacopoeia, also helps ladies and their partners in improving their reproduction capability by providing acupuncture and cupping, herbal treatment, and a lot more.

For more information on infertility, please contact us by
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Dr. Lily Liu Obstetrics & Gynecology

• PhD in Reproductive Medicine, Shanghai Second Medical University (China) • Attending Physician, Reproductive Medical Center, the International Peace Maternity & Child Health Hospital of China Welfare Institute, 2001-2004 • Attending Physician, East Hospital affiliated Tongji University, 2004-2008 • Member, Chinese Medical Association • Specializes in endocrine diseases, female sterility, PCOS, endometriosis, hormone replacement therapy in pre-menopausal and menopause, Abnormal Uterine Bleeding and Minimally Invasive Procedures (Laparoscopy and Hysteroscopy) • 15 years of experience and good reputation of consultation and treatment in infertility • Fluent in English and Chinese