



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists

FAQ

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ137
GYNECOLOGIC PROBLEMS

Treating Infertility

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When should a couple consider fertility testing and treatment?

If you are not able to get pregnant after 12 months of unprotected sex, your doctor can evaluate you and your partner. If you are older than 35 years or have certain medical problems, tests should be started earlier.

What causes infertility?

Infertility may be caused by a problem with the woman, the man, the couple, or their lifestyle. **Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)** also may reduce a couple's fertility. Infertility may be caused by more than one factor (see the FAQ [Evaluating Infertility](#)).

What treatments are available for infertility?

To treat infertility, your doctor may suggest medication, surgery, or **assisted reproductive technologies (ART)**. You may be referred to a fertility specialist. In some cases, different treatments may be used together to improve results. Whether the problem lies with one or both partners, a number of treatments could be considered.

How is successful infertility treatment defined?

You should know the expected success rates of the treatment you use and how success is defined. Some clinics define success rates for ART based on the number of live births. Others define success based on the number of pregnancies (even if they do not result in live births). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists the success rates for ART for most clinics in the United States on its web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/ART/ART2007/index.htm>). You should discuss the success rates of your options with your doctor.

What if my infertility is linked to lifestyle?

If the reason for infertility is linked to lifestyle, you can take steps that will help. For instance, your doctor may suggest you change when or how often you have sex. You may need to lose or gain weight, increase or decrease exercise, or stop smoking.

What should I know before choosing medical treatment to help me become pregnant?

You should be aware of what is involved in medical treatment to help you become pregnant. Some treatments require much expense and effort from both partners. Many increase the chance of a **multiple pregnancy**. You may want to check your health insurance to see if it covers the treatments.

What is ovulation induction?

If the woman does not ovulate (release an egg from an ovary), there are medications she can take to cause ovulation. Even if a woman is ovulating, she may need to release more eggs in order to get pregnant.

The medication used most often to cause ovulation is clomiphene citrate. It may be used for several cycles. The dosage may be increased over time if ovulation does not occur.

Ovulation or pregnancy may not occur after treatment with clomiphene citrate. If not, medications called gonadotropins may be given by injection. These drugs stimulate the eggs to develop. Blood tests and **ultrasound** are used to track the development of eggs. If too many eggs develop, your doctor may stop that cycle.

Most women who take drugs to cause ovulation start to ovulate regularly. If there are no other problems, more than one half of such women get pregnant within six treatment cycles. If a woman does not start ovulating, other tests may be needed.

Are there side effects of treatment with medication to induce ovulation?

A multiple pregnancy may occur with the use of these drugs. The risk is higher with gonadotropins than with clomiphene citrate. If this happens, your doctor will explain your options. One option is fetal reduction, in which one or more fetuses are terminated to give the remaining fetuses a better chance to grow into a healthy baby.

Rarely, a condition called **ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome** may occur. If you are at risk of this condition, treatment may be altered, and you will be closely monitored.

What types of surgery can be performed to treat infertility?

If the fallopian tubes are blocked, surgery may be done to open them. Surgery also may be done to correct the following problems:

- Remove growths such as polyps or fibroids
- Remove scarring from previous surgery, infection, or **endometriosis**
- Treat endometriosis (if found)

If the problem is with the man's sperm, surgery can sometimes fix it. The success of surgery depends on the type and extent of the problem.

What is artificial insemination?

With artificial insemination, sperm is placed in a woman's uterus by means other than sex. In most cases, the sperm are treated in a lab. The goal is to decrease the risk of infections and increase the chance that an egg will be fertilized. Around the time the woman ovulates, the doctor places the sperm into the uterus.

The woman's partner or a donor may provide the sperm for insemination. Sperm from a donor is frozen, and the donor is checked to make sure he is free of certain medical problems. These problems include some genetic disorders and STDs, including **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)**. Talk with your doctor about the specific tests that are done at the lab where you are treated.

What are assisted reproductive technologies (ART)?

ART refers to the ways eggs and sperm are processed to help an infertile couple conceive a child. They are done in a lab. Sometimes, ART treatments use donor eggs or sperm. The sperm also may come from your partner through **masturbation** or the use of a special condom during intercourse. In some cases, sperm may be obtained surgically by **sperm aspiration** or **testicular biopsy**.

Examples of ART procedures are in vitro fertilization (IVF), gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), and zygote intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT).

What is in vitro fertilization (IVF)?

IVF uses sperm to fertilize eggs from the woman in a lab. The fertilized egg then is placed in the woman's uterus to grow. For IVF, eggs are removed from an ovary just before a woman ovulates. Most often, the eggs are combined with healthy sperm and monitored in the lab to see if they become fertilized. Sometimes, a single sperm may be injected into each egg. A few days later, one or more fertilized eggs (embryos) are placed in the woman's uterus through her vagina. This is called embryo transfer. Transferring fewer embryos reduces the risk of a multiple pregnancy. Any extra embryos that are not used may be frozen and stored for later use.

What are some of the risks of IVF?

As with ovulation drugs and other procedures, IVF may result in multiple pregnancy and ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. Fetal reduction is an option in multiple pregnancies.

What is gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT)?

GIFT may be used for women who have certain conditions of the cervix. In this procedure, eggs are removed from a woman's ovary. The eggs and sperm are then placed in the fallopian tube using **laparoscopy** and fertilization may result.

What is zygote intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT)?

In this procedure, the eggs are fertilized in a lab. One or more embryos then are placed in the fallopian tube using laparoscopy and pregnancy may result.

What are some of the risks of GIFT and ZIFT?

Both treatments are more costly than IVF because they require surgery. GIFT and ZIFT may cause multiple pregnancy and hyperstimulation syndrome. As with any surgical procedure, both procedures carry additional risks, such as infection or problems related to the anesthesia.

Glossary

Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART): Procedures that involve processing human eggs and sperm or both to help an infertile couple conceive a child.

Endometriosis: A condition in which tissue similar to that normally lining the uterus is found outside of the uterus, usually on the ovaries, fallopian tubes, and other pelvic structures.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV): A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Laparoscopy: A surgical procedure in which a slender, light-transmitting instrument, the laparoscope, is used to view the pelvic organs or perform surgery.

Masturbation: Self-stimulation of the genitals, usually resulting in orgasm.

Multiple Pregnancy: A pregnancy in which there are two or more fetuses.

Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome: A condition caused by overstimulation of the ovaries that may cause painful swelling of the ovaries and fluid in the abdomen and lungs.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs): Diseases that are spread by sexual contact, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital warts, herpes, syphilis, and infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).

Sperm Aspiration: The removal of sperm from part of the male reproductive tract, such as the epididymis, vas deferens, or testicle.

Testicular Biopsy: A procedure to obtain a sample of tissue from the testicles.

Ultrasound: A test in which sound waves are used to examine internal structures.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ137: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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