

Infertility: Helping others understand

Information for family and friends



Fertility New Zealand is a registered charity
supporting people with fertility issues

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INFORMATION | SUPPORT | ADVOCACY

People who are experiencing delayed fertility sometimes find it difficult to discuss with others. This leaflet is intended to assist you in understanding some of the medical and emotional issues. It also suggests some ways you may be able to help a relative or friend who is experiencing infertility.

Facts about infertility

- A couple is regarded as having a fertility problem when they have not conceived after 12 months of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.
- Infertility will affect 26% of New Zealanders at some stage of their life.
- Infertility is not just a female problem – in about 40% of infertile couples the problem is a female factor, in about 40% it is a male one and for the remaining 20% there is a joint problem, or the cause is unknown.
- There are many causes of infertility; common problems include poor sperm quality, blocked fallopian tubes, endometriosis and hormonal imbalances – to name a few.
- Treatments for fertility problems are many and varied. Some common treatments include medications to improve the production of eggs, surgery on the fallopian tubes to fix blockages, insemination of the woman with either the partner's sperm or with donor sperm, in vitro fertilisation (IVF) or IVF with intra cytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI).
- Though success rates vary, there is no guarantee of success; in fact, a single cycle of a treatment such as IVF has a less than 50% likelihood of resulting in a pregnancy. Many treatments also carry some health risks.
- Some people try natural treatments such as acupuncture and naturopathic treatments.
- Some couples choose not to seek treatment; infertility treatment is emotionally draining, and although some publicly funded treatment is available in New Zealand, specific eligibility criteria must be met, and there may be a wait to access treatment.
- Some couples create a family through adoption, while others will remain without children.

The loss of one's fertility is similar to the death of a loved one – but there is nothing tangible to mourn the loss of.

Well meaning advice

When someone we care about has a problem, it is natural to try to help in whatever way we can. If there is nothing specific we can do, then often we try to give helpful advice.

Myths about infertility

- **Just relaxing or taking a holiday will 'cure' infertility**
For 80% of couples there is a proven medical cause; just relaxing or taking a holiday will not cure the problem.
- **Stress causes infertility**
It is unproven that stress causes infertility, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that fertility problems cause stress.
- **Reminding people of the difficulties of child-rearing will help them feel better**
Most couples are aware of the challenges of parenting, such as sleepless nights and loss of leisure time, but have decided that becoming parents is more important. Suggesting that they are in some way 'lucky', though well-intentioned, can be seen as not understanding their distress, being patronising or even insulting.
- **Treatment for delayed fertility is always successful**
Although modern treatment is successful for a number of people, repeated cycles of treatment may be needed. Sadly, in some cases treatment will not be successful.
- **Adopt and you will conceive naturally**
A number of research projects have looked into the phenomenon of couples having a naturally-conceived baby following an adoption. It has been found that couples who don't adopt have the same chance of conceiving naturally as couples who do adopt. ▶



The emotional impact of infertility

◀ Infertility is a most distressing and disabling life event

The loss of one's fertility and the dream of a family is similar to the death of a loved one, except that there is nothing tangible to mourn the loss of. We live in a world in which most people fulfil this dream, so infertile people are constantly surrounded by images of children and families, painful reminders of what they yearn for. Friends and family are often having babies at the time when they are struggling with the realisation that they have a fertility problem.

For some, the loss of fertility is the ultimate loss of control

Infertility means losing control of your reproductive future. It may mean organising your body and life around a series of investigations and treatment cycles. This means exposing a very personal and private part of one's life to a group of people in an infertility clinic; it may mean being instructed when to have sex and when not to; and it may mean having to celebrate news of others' pregnancies. The future becomes uncertain; it can become difficult to plan careers when there is always the hope of a pregnancy in the near future. Travel plans may also have to fit in around treatment; and indeed the need for a break or holiday may have to be balanced against the need to pay for treatment or investigations.

This loss of control may manifest itself in many ways, including anger which may be directed at friends and family.

The journey through infertility is like a rollercoaster

The waiting game each month is often peppered with spurts of optimism followed by pessimism. It is an emotional roller coaster; with the rollercoaster hitting the high – only to be followed by a crash at the bottom when another period arrives or the treatment fails or the hoped-for adoption doesn't happen. Some fertility medications can also affect moods.

There are many ways of dealing with the emotional impact of infertility

Some common themes include:

Depression: It is not unusual for people to feel depressed about their fertility problems. All fertility clinics in NZ have counsellors who are able to assist people in managing the grief associated with infertility.

Avoidance: If you have a young family or are pregnant, it may be painful for them to be confronted by your fertility. Family times such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas and Christenings may be especially difficult times.

Secrecy: Some people don't reveal their fertility problems to anyone, and this may include close family friends. Some feel that it is a private thing, and no one else's business, or others may feel too vulnerable and sensitive about it to discuss it with anyone.

What you can do to help

• Be available, and be able to just listen without always giving advice, no matter how well intentioned.

The most valuable gift you can give is your attention. There is nothing you can say that will change what has happened or is happening, but just being available to listen without making judgements is very valuable.

• Think of how they may feel at family and child centred celebrations.

Leave the choice of attending special occasions up to them. Keep inviting them but give some thought to how some 'adults only' occasions can

be enjoyed. Think about how to involve them in conversation; it can be difficult to engage in conversation if the occasions are always centred around children and babies.

• Show you care.

Accept that sometimes people may want to discuss infertility, they may or may not want to discuss a failed cycle, and there will be times when they do not want to talk about infertility at all. Respect this; but let them know that you care about what is happening to them at this time and that you will be there to listen if they wish you to.

• Suggest they seek professional help if their grief or depression seems disabling over a long time.

All fertility clinics in NZ have professional counsellors who are able to assist those suffering from acute or chronic depression. Whilst depression is not uncommon, if it is interfering with day to day life or has gone on for a long time then professional help may be needed. ■

Please note that the information presented in this brochure is intended only as a brief summary. For specific advice on your particular medical situation you should always consult your professional health care provider.
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