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Egg Freezing (Oocyte cryopreservation)

What is egg freezing?

The technology to freeze sperm and embryos (eggs that have been fertilized with sperm in a laboratory setting) have been utilized for many years to help women conceive. The ability to freeze eggs before they are fertilized is a relatively new technology for fertility preservation (delaying pregnancy until a later time). The first baby born from a frozen egg was in 1986; and at best estimate, there have now been approximately 1000 babies born from frozen eggs.

Once a woman has decided she is ready to be pregnant, the frozen eggs are thawed and fertilized with sperm. The resulting fertilized eggs (or embryos) are then transferred to the woman's uterus.

How does egg freezing work?

The process for egg freezing is similar to a traditional In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) cycle and takes approximately 4 to 6 weeks. A woman typically takes birth control pills followed by injectable hormone medications to stimulate the ovaries to produce multiple eggs (oocytes). The eggs are retrieved in a minor surgical procedure and the mature eggs are frozen immediately. The number of eggs produced and the percentage of mature eggs recovered is variable from person to person. Once the woman is ready to conceive, she may be placed on a new regimen of hormones to prepare her uterus for the embryos to be placed. The eggs are thawed and fertilized with sperm, then cultured in the laboratory for about 3-5 days. The resulting embryo(s) are transferred into the woman's uterus in a simple procedure.

Who can benefit from egg freezing?

Egg freezing may be used by women who wish to delay childbearing for whatever reason.

The most common reason women have chosen egg freezing is in the setting of a cancer diagnosis. Treatments for cancer such as chemotherapy and radiation may damage eggs and result in infertility. Depending on the cancer diagnosis and recommendations from a woman's oncologists, she may choose to freeze eggs before undergoing cancer treatment in order to preserve her fertility.

In traditional IVF attempts, extra embryos were cryopreserved for future use. However, some people have ethical or religious conflicts to creating embryos or making decisions about disposition of additional embryos when they have completed their family building. For some, freezing eggs before fertilization is a more comfortable option.

Egg freezing may also be used in the setting of a donor egg/recipient IVF cycle. In cases where a woman is unable to conceive with her own eggs, she has the option of using donor eggs – typically the donor is 20-30 years old and in peak fertility. The traditional method for a donor egg/recipient IVF cycle is to match a recipient with a donor and sync their menstrual cycles with medication so that when the donor's eggs are ready to be retrieved and fertilized, the recipient's uterine lining is ready for the resulting embryo(s). This synchronization can take weeks to months, but with frozen eggs, the recipient can decide which time frame is best for her.

Future Benefits:

In today's society, many women want to delay child-bearing until they are much older. Fertility decreases with age, a slow decline after 30, then declining much more quickly the older we get. By age 40, the chances of spontaneous pregnancy are less than 50% of what they were at age 30, and other risks such as miscarriage and Down's syndrome are significantly increased. As the technology of egg freezing has improved, we can offer the option of freezing and storing eggs at a younger age, allowing a woman to choose when she is ready for a family.

What you should know:

Although egg freezing provides options for women that have not previously been available, the process should be carefully considered. The process of IVF and ovarian stimulation is not without risk and egg freezing is still a relatively new technology. The American Society of Reproductive Medicine maintains that egg freezing is experimental. Our clinic has IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval for egg freezing.

If you are interested in egg freezing, please contact our office (206-510-0000) for more detailed information from our experienced team.