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We need to talk about fertility

FERTILITY PROBLEMS IN MEN ARE MORE COMMON THAN YOU MIGHT THINK. HERE'S HOW TO DISCUSS THEM WITH YOUR PARTNER, FAMILY AND FRIENDS

WORDS BY HOWARD CALVERT

THE EXPERTS



DR NAUF ALBENDAR

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The Andrology Company

For many couples, trying for a baby isn't as simple as stopping using contraception and days later the pregnancy test magically showing a positive result. The reality, according to the NHS, is that one in seven couples have difficulty conceiving, and male infertility is likely to be a factor in 50% of those cases.

For men who assume they have an unlimited reservoir of healthy sperm, this may come as a blow, and bring with it feelings of shame and humiliation. A recent survey by fertility medicine company Pharmasure showed that 42% of men experience negative feelings during the fertility process, while research by home pregnancy test brand Clearblue found that 32% of couples find it too difficult to talk about struggles to conceive.

In a world where people reveal their innermost thoughts on social media, why do so many couples find this subject hard to talk about? And why do men in particular clam up?

'Men tend to have a laid-back attitude towards conception, as they assume they'll be able to impregnate their partner easily,' says Dr Nauf Albendar, creator of the *Womb Effect* blog. 'But if they're faced with infertility problems, some men see it as a sign of being "less of a man", which can make it difficult to deal with.'

It's often the case that if a heterosexual couple are having problems becoming pregnant, the



woman is tested rigorously, while the man simply has his sperm count analysed. 'Fertility issues related to men are all about sperm counts,' says Dr Harry Naerger, a senior consultant urological surgeon who works with couples trying to conceive. 'Normally you would expect a count of greater than 15-20 million sperm per millilitre of ejaculate. The lower the count, the lower the chance of conception.'

Naerger says reduced sperm counts can result from a number of issues, including pituitary problems and testicular problems caused by



*To read more
about how
fertility issues
affect women, turn
to page 36*

previous surgery on the testes, previous infection in the testes, or swollen veins, known as varicocele.

A global phenomenon

There's also evidence that overall sperm counts are decreasing. A 2017 study by the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, found the average sperm count had declined 59% over the past 40 years.

'The testes are positioned where they are to keep them cool, so increased temperatures are said to have an effect,' says Naerger. 'This could possibly be a side effect of global warming.'

There's also more oestrogen in the environment from things such as cattle food to the increased use of the oral contraceptive pill, and that may potentially have an effect.'

Other factors that can cause problems conceiving include low testosterone levels, erectile dysfunction and age – men over 40 tend to have sperm that are more susceptible to mutation.

The general advice for any man trying to increase sperm quantity and quality is to quit smoking, lose weight, be more physically active and take multivitamins, particularly vitamins C ➡

HFM FERTILITY

and E, selenium and zinc (for more, see 'Boost your fertility', right). It's also important to keep the testes cool – this means wearing shorts in hot weather, and no hot baths.

AlBendar also cites important new studies about increasing the chances of pregnancy. 'The more the man ejaculates, the better the quality of the sperm. Research has found that semen produced within one-to-three hours of a man's most recent ejaculation were faster and more mobile than those produced by men who abstained for several days. While men have previously been advised to have less sex to increase the chances of pregnancy, the opposite is true. For healthier sperm, there needs to be frequent sex around the ovulation period.'

Help is at hand

If couples are still struggling to conceive, surgical interventions are available, depending on the underlying problem. These can include correction of anatomical anomalies (such as varicocele or obstruction of the sperm ducts), and sperm retrieval as part of assisted reproductive technology (ART). IVF treatment can also be successful with only a handful of sperm, and that has made a huge difference to male fertility treatment.

However, despite these advances in treatments, men still find it difficult to talk openly about this subject. 'There are still huge misconceptions within society that infertility is predominantly a female issue, when this is clearly not the case,' says Marinos Alexandrou, director of The Andrology Company and Adam Health.

'This excludes many men from infertility conversations and accounts for the relative lack of care and services for men with fertility

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“MEN ARE HALF OF THE FERTILITY EQUATION – THEY NEED TO BE INVOLVED IN THE CONVERSATION”

problems. Men can feel excluded as their needs are often ignored, which is why spaces for sharing experiences are so important.'

It's clear that a better understanding of men's reproductive health is required, and more open conversations must be had, including increased coverage in the media. 'There's still an expectation that men are able to deal with issues of infertility and get on with their lives, which is both unrealistic and outdated,' says Alexandrou. 'Men are half of the fertility equation and should be treated as such.'

As a couple, the advice is to explore the expert help that is on offer, from fertility specialists, urologists and endocrinologists to psychologists and counsellors for mental health. Alexandrou adds that it's crucial to keep the channels of communication with your partner open. 'Men should be involved in the process, talk about treatment, how it's making your partner feel and how you can support them. It's important not to suppress your emotions about what you are going through as a couple.' 

