

Is Your Biological Clock Ticking? Fear not!

Once upon a time, a little girl with a big heart dreamed of being a princess and meeting her Prince Charming. In her dream she was surrounded by her very own little princesses and princes in a beautiful four-bedroom castle she shared with her handsome Prince Charming.

But as she grew, that spirited girl's dream changed. Instead of being just a princess, she wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer or the CEO of a business kingdom. So she went to college and focused on her career—all the while still dreaming of the little princesses and princes she would cradle in her arms... someday.

Sounds like a fairytale, huh? Well, today many women are indeed choosing to have it all—a satisfying career *and* a family. But delaying marriage and then motherhood does present some obstacles to having a baby. But fear not! A relatively new process for egg freezing called “vitrification” is offering women the ability to essentially “stop the clock” until they are ready to realize their dream of growing a family.

USE IT (YOUR EGGS) OR LOOSE IT? NOT NECESSARILY SO.

Unlike the 1950s when many young women said “I do” just a year or two after graduating from high school, more and more women (and men) are choosing to walk down the aisle for the first time while pushing 30. According to U.S. census data, women are getting married at 27 and men at 29, on average.

Although this trend is great news for women as it relates to education and earning power, it's not so good news for their proverbial biological clock.

According to Noel Peng, M.D., a board-certified and fellowship-trained reproductive endocrinologist and infertility specialist at IVF Institute in Dallas, Texas, a woman's eggs begin to diminish in quantity and quality as she ages. “A recent study found that women lost 90 percent of their eggs by the time they are 30 years old, and 97 percent are gone by the age of 40,” he says. “This means that as a woman ages, her odds of getting pregnant drop significantly.”

Dr. Peng is among the growing number of infertility specialists offering the option of egg freezing, or cryopreservation, to women who are choosing to delay motherhood. It is also an option for adolescents and children who have been diagnosed with cancer or other serious diseases and must undergo fertility-threatening treatments.

“Today, many women are choosing to focus on their careers before settling down and starting a family,” Dr. Peng says. “I have seen patients who are in medical school or those who haven't met their spouse yet. They know in their hearts they want to have baby in a few years—but not

“If you are in your late 20s or early 30s and hoping to conceive in the next several years, egg freezing is something to seriously consider,” he says.
yet.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

It’s been 36 years since scientists successfully combined fresh egg and sperm in a petri dish to produce the first “test tube baby” born from in vitro fertilization (IVF). Although the technique seemed futuristic at the time, IVF has become a popular choice for couples struggling with infertility. It is estimated that over 5 million children have been born around the world—thanks to IVF.

Until recently, the only method for preserving eggs for fertilization at a later date was a slow-freeze method. But unlike sperm, which has been successfully frozen and used for many years, eggs contain a lot of water, which makes freezing more difficult. With slow-freezing, ice crystals can form within the egg, and these ice crystals can destroy the cell’s structure.

“With vitrification, the egg freezes so quickly that ice crystals don’t have time to form,” Dr. Peng says. “When the woman is ready to try pregnancy, the thawed eggs can be fertilized using ICSI, a technique that injects one sperm directly into one egg.”

In 2012, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine declared egg freezing no longer experimental because eggs frozen with vitrification are similar to fresh eggs in terms of their ability to lead to pregnancy.

“Worldwide, the number of babies born from frozen eggs is growing, and we are seeing good results,” Dr. Peng says.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

But how do you know if egg freezing is right for you?

There are several tests which can predict whether a woman has a faster biological clock, such as the anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH) test. This simple blood test helps to estimate what is called “ovarian reserve” because its level can reflect the size of the remaining egg supply in the ovary at a particular time.

“The test can’t tell you exactly how many eggs you have left – or the quality of those eggs – but it can tell you if there is an inadequate supply,” he says.

According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, AMH testing is especially useful for women who have a higher risk of reduced ovarian reserve including:

- Women who are over age 35 years;
- Women with a family history of early menopause;

- Women with only one ovary;
- Women with a history of ovarian surgery, chemotherapy or pelvic radiation therapy;
- Women with unexplained infertility; and
- Women who have shown poor response to ovarian stimulation.

“With the test results in hand, we can discuss their reproductive options and develop a plan. If a woman is not in a situation to get pregnant quickly, she may choose to have her eggs frozen for the future.”

Dr. Peng advises women to seek the help of an infertility specialist if they have been trying to get pregnant for six months or more. They should also seek the care of a specialist if they have had more than one miscarriage or are considering their options for fertility preservation.

“Knowledge can be empowering,” Dr. Peng adds. “We can help you make an informed decision.”

###