

## **For Women Worried About Fertility, Egg Bank Is a New Option**

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Published: September 21, 2004

Grace Drake still hopes that someday she will meet Mr. Right and have a family the old-fashioned way.

But as the program director of a fertility clinic in Austin, Tex., Ms. Drake, 35, sees women every day who are in their 30's and 40's and want desperately to have children but cannot.

So she decided to take out some insurance: She froze her eggs.

"Now I have a sense of security knowing that this procedure could buy me a little more time to have a family," Ms. Drake said.

Until very recently, egg freezing, or oocyte cryopreservation, was carried out only in carefully controlled research settings and was available only to young women facing chemotherapy or suffering from illnesses that might make them infertile.

But a company called Extend Fertility is now offering egg freezing to any woman with healthy ovaries and approximately \$15,000 to spend.

The company, started by a 34-year-old Harvard M.B.A., Christy Jones, opened its first fertility clinic in June in Los Angeles. That was quickly followed by clinics in San Francisco, Dallas and, starting this month, New York.

To date, only three women have banked eggs with Extend - including Ms. Drake and Ms. Jones, who has 12 eggs on ice - but many more say they are ready to go through the process. Not surprisingly, the biggest interest has been in urban locations where, typically, more women are in the work force and consequently may be delaying marriage and children.

Even before the official announcement that Extend was going into partnership with RMA of New York, a fertility clinic on Manhattan's Upper East Side, 20 percent of calls to the company's main number were inquiries from women in the New York area.

It seems only fair that single women should have the option of starting their own fertility savings accounts. After all, men have been able to bank their sperm for decades. And couples going through in vitro fertilization routinely freeze embryos for future pregnancy attempts.

But egg freezing has yet to become widespread because, while sperm and embryos freeze fairly easily, eggs are much more fragile. Egg cells contain a lot of water, said Dr. Owen Davis, president of the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology. As a result, he said, ice crystals can form that may damage the egg's structure.

Dr. Michael Tucker, scientific director at Georgia Reproductive Specialists in Atlanta, the clinic credited with producing the first baby from a frozen egg in the United States, said, "The joke is that anyone can freeze eggs, but can you thaw them, fertilize them and actually make babies from them?"

Researchers report pregnancy success rates of about 20 percent, but all the studies are based on very small numbers and the technology, most experts agree, is still in its infancy. Only about 100 babies worldwide are known to have been born using frozen eggs, the majority of them in Italy, where the procedure has been available since 1994.

With such limited numbers, researchers are loath to say with any certainty that freezing and thawing will not result in chromosomal damage to the delicate egg.

"The problem with using it to stop the biological clock is that we don't have a lot of data to say how good the outcome can be," Dr. Tucker said.

In fact, many medical experts oppose the current trend toward commercializing the technique. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine is expected to release its first official statement on egg freezing soon. The society has warned, "At the present time, oocyte cryopreservation should not be marketed or offered as a means to defer reproductive aging."

But even those doctors who caution against egg freezing acknowledge that science in the field is advancing at a rapid rate.

"The A.S.R.M. feels it's premature to openly market this now, but these technologies are quickly evolving and the limited body of evidence we have is encouraging," said Dr. Marc Fritz, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of North Carolina and chairman of the society's committee on the topic.

Harvesting eggs for freezing involves a process similar to that of in vitro fertilization: For about a month, a woman must give herself hormone injections to stimulate the ovaries to produce more than one egg. Typically, a cycle of fertility drugs will produce about 12 to 15 eggs, which are then drawn into a needle.

The eggs are frozen using a cryoprotectant formula that helps dehydrate the watery eggs so that they can be safely frozen without forming damaging ice crystals. When a woman is ready to use her eggs, a thawing formulation reverses the process, rehydrating the eggs back to their original state.

All this technology doesn't come cheap: Extend's clinics charge \$10,000 for the egg retrieval process, \$40 a month for storage, and women can expect to pay an additional \$3,000 to \$4,000 for the necessary fertility drugs.

"It is expensive," Ms. Jones acknowledged, "but if you look at it in terms of other alternatives for having a baby later in life - such as I.V.F., donor eggs or adoption - those are all very expensive, too."

The Extend Fertility Web site appeals directly to women who are afraid of running out their biological clocks. The Web site notes that women today are busy "obtaining advanced degrees and pursuing successful careers."

The site also provides links to statistics on age and declining fertility. According to the reproductive society, about 20 percent of women now wait until after age 35 to start a family, despite the fact that fertility begins to drop off precipitously at that point. At age 30, a woman has about a 20 percent chance per month of getting pregnant and only a 12 percent risk of miscarriage. By age 40, the chance of getting pregnant drops to 5 percent per month, while the risk of miscarriage rises to 34 percent.

"Freezing eggs doesn't offer a 100 percent guarantee," said Ms. Jones. "But when I look at the statistics, the potential of getting pregnant with frozen eggs is a lot higher than my natural chances for pregnancy at age 40. I feel like I'm tripling my odds."

The main reason that pregnancy rates decline so rapidly after age 35 is that older eggs are more prone to chromosomal abnormalities.

Dr. Alan Copperman, of RMA of New York, said the clinic intended to offer egg freezing to women under 40.

But he added that women who are interested in freezing their eggs will also be assessed on things besides chronological age, like the results of a test that measures ovarian function.

"We aren't trying to take advantage of women in a desperate situation," he said. "The intent is to use this on patients who have a chance of producing good-quality eggs that can survive the process and eventually produce a healthy baby."

Egg quality may decline rapidly with age, but the ability to carry a healthy baby does not, experts say. The best evidence for this is that when older women use donor eggs from younger women, successful pregnancies are possible at least up to age 50.

Though Extend's clinics counsel patients about potential risks and the chances for pregnancy, some doctors worry about the ethics of offering an experimental procedure in a for-profit setting.

"Just because we can do something doesn't mean that we should or we must," Dr. Fritz said.

But single women like Ms. Drake, who view egg freezing as a reproductive insurance policy, have no such qualms.

"I would like to have children someday," she said, "and I like knowing that I have taken advantage of everything currently available in order to give myself that option."