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Women freeze eggs to have babies later But freezing eggs offers no guarantees

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P-I REPORTER

Amy Timmins' endometrial cancer, which had twice gone into remission, returned again in March. Doctors told her she needed a hysterectomy to remove the cancer for good.

At 35, married and hoping to bear children, she searched for options that would allow her to beat the cancer and have kids.

So Timmins turned to a clinic that offered to freeze her eggs before her scheduled cancer surgery so she and her husband would still have a chance to conceive. She opted to fertilize them and now has 10 embryos on ice. The couple affectionately has named them Bob 1 through Bob 10. A cousin of hers agreed to be their surrogate.

"I know I will have done everything in my power to preserve my fertility," Timmins said.

Human egg freezing is still considered experimental, but "there's enough data to use this on women with no other options," such as a cancer patient, said Dr. Lorna Marshall.

She's a reproductive endocrinologist at Pacific Northwest Fertility, which has offered the procedure to cancer patients since December.

But, increasingly, healthy women are choosing the procedure to stop the clock on their fertility while they focus on life, education and careers.

That's causing experts to urge caution about something that offers no guarantees.

Unlike freezing embryos, which has been done successfully for years, freezing human eggs is difficult.

Eggs are the largest cell in the body and filled with water. They easily get freezer burn. Ice crystals form quickly in them when they are frozen. They are damaged easily during freezing and thawing, increasing the risk of abnormalities.

Advocates say egg freezing is great for single women or those without a willing partner. It also avoids any potential custody battles if a partner decides not to use fertilized embryos.

That's the route Megan Griswold decided to take.

It was Christmas, and she was home alone thinking about her children. Not any she had, but the ones she wanted in the future.

She wasn't sure if her boyfriend was "the one," plus she had a budding career as the star of her own one-woman stage show.

At 38, she wondered how many years she had left to bear children of her own.

So she looked to preserve her reproductive future. Freeze her 38-year-old eggs, so when the time is right, she'll have what she calls a backup plan of younger eggs to fertilize and, with good fortune, conceive a child.

Opponents say the gamble is too high. A woman is basically betting her reproductive time on new technology. If all goes according to plan, she can live her life now and have a biological child whenever she wants. If the plan fails, she has spent her baby-making years believing in an empty promise.

"We don't want practitioners to take advantage of patients and have them embrace a procedure that's not yet proven," Marshall said.

The procedure starts with a series of hormone injections to increase the number of eggs a woman produces. Doctors hope for at least a dozen. The eggs are taken out with a needle, treated with a protectant and sunk into a tank of liquid nitrogen. Years later, when a woman is ready, they are thawed, fertilized and implanted into her womb.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine cautions against egg freezing, even for cancer patients, calling it "investigational" and questioning its safety and effectiveness.

It noted in a June 2005 report that as of December 2004, about 100 children had been born from frozen eggs, but "the pregnancy rate is not high enough to justify its routine use in clinical practice." The society recommended that egg freezing be used only experimentally as part of an approved study disclosing all risks.

Griswold worked with a company called Extend Fertility. It works with fertility clinics and helps bring "together industry-leading science, experienced medical care and support, and secure storage facilities," according to its Web site.

In Seattle, Extend is in partnership with the Northwest Center for Reproductive Services, which hopes to offer egg-freezing starting in November.

Christy Jones, chief executive and founder of Extend, said the company has licensed a method of slow-freezing/rapid-thawing of eggs, which is supposed to eliminate the ice crystal problem and better preserve the egg. Extend conducted a small study in which it froze eggs from several women. Then, a few months later, it thawed and fertilized them. It implanted the embryos into eight women. Seven out of the eight became pregnant, and of the six women who gave birth, seven babies were born -- an egg survival rate of more than 80 percent, Jones said.

The overall live birth rate for an embryo created using a thawed egg and placed in a uterus was between 22 percent and 32 percent, reports the Center for Reproductive Medicine and Infertility in New York. It contacted every center in the world that reported results of egg freezing using slow-freezing methods between January 1997 and June 2005.

About two-thirds of the 300 babies born after egg freezing have been from this method.

Some scientists are looking into the reverse -- a fast freezing called vitrification -- to chill the eggs before ice can crystallize. About 100 babies have been born from vitrified eggs and some see it as the next wave in egg freezing, according to an April issue of the journal *Science*.

Because fertility clinics are not regulated, it's not known exactly how many facilities offer egg freezing or how successful it really is.

But most clinics publish results of pregnancies from frozen embryos, which should serve as a benchmark, said Dr. Kurt Weimer, an embryologist at the Northwest Center.

"I hope I'm still doing this when we have patients come back, and we thaw their eggs and they get pregnant," Weimer said.

"We're transitioning from purely experimental to mainstream."

Jones, who was her company's first client, froze her own eggs at 34. Still, she agrees that egg freezing is investigational and said each clinic works with an internal review board for approval. But she doesn't think the American Society for Reproductive Medicine should try to govern who has access to the technology.

"Their concern stems from if everyone were to say, 'We freeze eggs,' then it is selling false hope to women, and women really need to understand the data," Jones said. "It's certainly not a guarantee, and we don't tell women it is."

Griswold was monitored in Seattle before the egg extraction and freezing were performed in California at a site already working with Extend.

When she decides to have a baby, doctors will thaw and fertilize her 14 eggs and implant one or more embryos.

"So now I've got 14 eggs living in something that looks more like a propane tank for a barbecue than a home for my children to be," Griswold writes on her Web site. "No matter what happens, I feel extraordinarily lucky to avail myself of the most advanced technology. Medicine aims to optimize health. And for me, reproductive longevity is an important part of that picture."

In a conversation before she took her one-woman show from Seattle to a New York City stage, she said she hopes freezing her eggs will make it easier and less expensive for other women down the line.

"Going through this experience has made me all the more committed about being a parent one day," Griswold said. "There's no perfect time to have kids, and the person I've wanted to become has just taken a bit longer."

EGG FREEZING

Who is a candidate: In her 20s, a woman's eggs begin to diminish in quantity and quality. Rapid and significant deterioration of the eggs occurs after age 35. So only women 40 and younger usually are considered for the egg freezing procedure. Before freezing a woman's eggs, a doctor will consider age, hormone level cutoffs, medical history, general health, reproductive health and other factors.

Success rates: Clinics generally report a successful live birth rate of 22 percent to 32 percent. Some U.S. clinics have shown higher success rates in a small number of research patients. There have been more than 300 live births from frozen eggs in the world, with no reported increase in abnormalities.

How it works: First, hormone injections increase the number of eggs a woman produces. Then eggs are taken out with a needle, treated with a protectant and sunk into a tank of liquid nitrogen. When a woman is ready, they are thawed, fertilized and implanted in her womb.

What does it cost: Most clinics charge about \$10,000 to freeze eggs plus the cost of medication, and an additional \$300 to \$400 annual storage fee. Insurance rarely covers the costs.

What to know: Find out the success rates of fertility clinics being considered. The reputable ones post success rates on their Web sites and submit them to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for publication.

Check whether the clinics have the scientific background to use new technology.

Ask how well they freeze their embryos. Freezing eggs is much more difficult, so if they don't do embryos well, they probably won't do eggs well.

Ask to talk to the clinic's embryologist, who knows about breakthroughs and advances in the laboratory before others.

Sources: Fertility and Sterility, Extend Fertility, Dr. Klaus Weimer, University of Southern California Fertility

LEARN MORE

- Extend Fertility, extendfertility.com or 800-841-7197.
- Northwest Center for Reproductive Services, nwreprosci.com.
- Pacific Northwest Fertility, visit pnwfertility.com.

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