

Putting Your Eggs in a Different Basket

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Grace Drake, a 35-year-old business student in Austin, thinks she's found a way to quiet the relentless ticking of her biological clock. She had 10 of her eggs frozen in August, a move that cost her about \$8,200 and, she insists, gave her some peace of mind. Of course, she may never need to use them. She could marry, she says, and start a family before it's too late to conceive naturally.

"I just think that being proactive is very important," she says, "and if it didn't work, I would know I had done everything I could do."



Christy Jones, here with fertility doctor Bradford Kolb, is the president and founder of Extend Fertility, which charges \$10,000 to extract and freeze a woman's eggs. (Ric Francis -- AP)

It sounds like *The Answer* -- especially during a time when many women are delaying marriage and having children until their careers are well underway. And who hasn't heard the scary fact that fertility plunges after a woman hits 35?

Drake's fears have certainly been heightened by the fact that, in addition to being a student, she works at a Texas Fertility Center (hence the slight reduction in the usual \$10,000 fee).

"I see the revolving door of women [with fertility problems] coming into the office. How can I not be frightened to death?" she says.

There's a movement afoot to make egg freezing more available -- to offer an expensive lifestyle choice, of sorts, to women who feel time-pressured to procreate before they're good and ready.

The issue (besides the matter of affordability) is whether the technology is ready. While the freezing of sperm and embryos are standard practices these days, eggs are a different story: An egg has a delicate structure that can be easily damaged during the freeze and thaw. According to some estimates, there have been only about 100 babies born from once-frozen eggs, most through a handful of specialists in Italy, Australia and the United States.

Still, the procedure has the potential to be a boon in a range of situations, such as allowing cancer patients to save their healthy eggs before sterilizing radiation treatment, and providing an option for couples who are morally opposed to freezing embryos.

Christy Jones is trying to help egg freezing enter the mainstream. The 34-year-old Harvard MBA launched Extend Fertility, an "egg preservation service," in June. The company's slogan: "Set your own biological clock." The fee is \$10,000 for extraction and freezing, plus about \$4,000 for pre-retrieval drugs (requiring an unpleasant series of self-injections) and around \$40 a month for storage. It would cost more to come back someday to get the eggs fertilized (with help from Mr. Right or Mr. Sperm Donor) and implanted.

Jones hopes to collaborate with a network of fertility clinics across the country, educating patients and helping to coordinate the procedure. They now have just a few partnering clinics (including Texas Fertility Center in Austin, where Drake froze her eggs), and plan to have a presence in, among other cities, New York, Atlanta, Miami and Washington within the next year.

Extend Fertility's first client was Jones herself, who had her eggs frozen this year. A savvy business decision, perhaps, but Jones says she did it to lessen her worries about future infertility. "I know that my eggs are there for me. So many of my friends are going through in vitro and having miscarriages."

She's also upfront about the nebulousness of the data, citing a pregnancy rate from frozen eggs at somewhere between 20 and 30 percent, an estimate that's based on an Italian study. She notes that "published results are not voluminous."

Fady Sharara, a reproductive endocrinologist who heads the Virginia Center for Reproductive Medicine in Reston, has offered the service to single women for almost three years. To his surprise, he's had no takers. He continues to urge young women to plan ahead and give themselves a bank of healthy eggs. "Let's say they're 32, they're thinking of their career, they don't have time to get pregnant," says Sharara. "They have the resources and there's no Mr. Right. I think it's a logical thing to do."

Renee Samuels, a single 28-year-old from Baltimore can certainly see the logic. She just doesn't have the resources. "It's a neat option," she says. "I'm nowhere near finding someone, and I'm the age my mom was when she had me." But, she adds wryly, "It's not an option for someone in my tax bracket."

Sharara and Jones, are keenly aware of all the hurdles, financial and technological. Sharara takes pains, for example, to emphasize that there's no guarantee a woman's frozen eggs will help her conceive a child. "This is not a foolproof technique," he says.

Drake's doctor, Lisa Hansard, says that she counsels women to consider egg freezing as "kind of a last resort," and that the clinic -- along with Extend Fertility -- follows standard research protocols. She also feels strongly that offering this service "is not exploitation of women's fears; it's looking at options," and adds that women should know that fertility does, in fact, drop precipitously with age: "That fear is real."

Infertility specialists like Hansard and Sharara say that whether women choose to freeze their eggs, they ought to look that biological clock straight in the face.

It gets frustrating, says Sharara, who keeps a family-size box of Kleenex on the edge of his desk. "Patients come in at 44 and ask me why they're not getting pregnant." When he and his colleagues tell them their eggs were at their peak a few decades ago, "they're not surprised, they're shocked, which is shocking to us." He thinks they're often misled by seeing high-profile

women such as Sen. John Edwards's wife, Elizabeth Edwards, who gave birth at 48 and 50. Sharara says she surely used donor eggs.

The purpose of offering egg freezing, he adds, "is not to intimidate, it's not to push women into doing something they don't want to do. I think that knowledge is power, and when you have the option then you can decide. And you can't come in my office at 42 and cry your brains out and tell me no one told me this before."