

“I’m 34 and I know people say the clock’s ticking. But I haven’t met the right guy yet. Anyway my girlfriend used IVF to have her baby after she’d been married for eight years, and now, they’re even talking about women freezing their eggs for later, so what’s the hurry...?”

women

Most Australian women and men believe they’ll have no problem when they decide they want to have children. But we know that one in every six couples experience fertility problems and a medical cause can’t always be found.

What the glossy magazines don’t tell you about those celebrity births

Unfortunately many Australian women believe they can delay becoming a mum until they’re in their late 30s and early 40s. The women’s magazines are full of Hollywood stars who’ve done just that, but the truth is that it’s more the exception than the rule.

What the glossy magazines DON’T tell you is how many of those older mums have used donated eggs to conceive their children.

Many women don’t realise they are born with every egg they will ever produce and the older they become, the more their remaining eggs deteriorate in quality. Women are not the same as men who can continue to produce sperm right until their eighties or beyond, although sperm quality deteriorates.

Put simply, old eggs produce less healthy embryos or healthy pregnancies. Once a woman has passed the age of 35 her potential to successfully deliver a child is significantly reduced. Even with the best infertility treatment in the world pregnancy may not occur.

The facts about your eggs and your chances of conceiving

Women are born with somewhere between one and three million eggs. Only 3-400 of those will ovulate in a woman’s life, the remainder simply die.

- > The rate of degeneration varies between women, so your age does not always equate with the age of your eggs
- > The chance of pregnancy in any month is best before 25 and fertility starts to decline after 30
- > By 35, your chance of conceiving is half what it was at 30 and at 40, your chances of conceiving reduces by half again. In other words beyond 30 your fertility is in steep decline
- > The numbers and quality of eggs drop significantly at least 10 years before your fertility is lost.

Other health issues

Of course there are many reasons why egg quality is compromised. Cancer therapies like chemotherapy and radiotherapy, past pelvic infections, smoking and poor lifestyle choices related to diet, alcohol, auto-immune diseases, and a family history of early menopause are potential causes.

Freezing your eggs

What about the idea of freezing your eggs? The latest technique of egg freezing has resulted in significant improvements in survival of eggs and pregnancy rates, however it is complicated, may not result in a pregnancy and should be discussed with an experienced physician.

Single or partnered, if you are thinking of waiting longer before trying for a baby, consider seeking advice from a fertility specialist through a referral from your GP about your personal fertility status, and your own biological clock. Hopefully you have an understanding GP, but you may have to insist on a referral – this is new territory even for some GPs. You may learn you don’t have any time to wait, or far less time than you assumed you had. Getting your personal fertility information allows you to make informed choices.

The message from the medical experts is startlingly clear. If you want to have a child and feel you’re in a position in your life where you’re ready for it to happen, then sooner is definitely better than later.

None of this information will solve the problem of finding Mr Right (if that’s who you’re looking for) and for some women, the social circumstances may never arise to embark on motherhood.

How and when you decide to pursue motherhood – if at all – is totally up to you. If you understand the basic science of fertility and the problems you may encounter you are in a position to make plans and decisions.