

OPERATION: BABY

With infertility in the news now more than ever, what are the biggest issues affecting women?



Having a baby is the most natural thing in the world. But getting pregnant doesn't always come easy.

Many women suffer from fertility problems and one in five Irish couples will have some difficulty conceiving. But there's always help, and Dr David Walsh, Medical Director at the Sims Clinic, Ireland's largest private fertility treatment unit, talked to us about what to do in your 20s to help things along.

"A lot of women have a choice now. Historically a woman wouldn't have known what her fertility was like until she tried, or maybe she didn't try, and she got pregnant. Or she was trying and she didn't get pregnant. And suddenly she finds she's not as fertile as she thought she was, or she's more fertile than she thought..."

"There is a place in between those two now and that is, just like men can check their sperm count, women can check their egg count. So, even into somebody's 20s there's nothing to say that they can't check their egg count and see," he added.

There's three groups of patients: those who end up with a low count, those with a normal count and those with a high count, Dr Walsh explained.

"I think it's useful information, knowledge is power. You're better off to know, then you can make a positive decision, 'am I going to do something about it or not? If I am, what am I going to do?'" he explained.

Egg numbers

"In terms of the egg numbers, probably polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and endometriosis are the main ones. Smoking will effect the ovaries as well. In terms of tubal function, most of that ends up being hidden damage from things like chlamydia that you never knew you had. And certainly, in the 20s, you'll find chlamydia in a vast majority of women from time to time because they're exposed to it and they don't realise it.

"It may never be explained, or it may never cause a problem, and indeed you may never know if it did cause a problem because a significant proportion of unexplained infertility is probably due to hidden tubal factors which you can't see.

"From the woman's point of view, I think the general things about being healthy, reasonably healthy, living your life and all that is important. Certainly if someone isn't feeling

so good, just check their general health; full blood count, those sorts of things are useful as well. But for me, in their 20s, an AMH (anti-mullerian hormone) is a wise thing to do and I would encourage any woman in their 20s to

get that checked so they know where they stand, and then maybe consider freezing their eggs," Dr Walsh said.

Egg freezing

"In a theoretical world, the women who freeze their eggs should be under 33, and they should probably freeze 20 eggs to increase the likelihood of being successful and having a baby from those eggs.

"A lot of women don't end up having to use them which is great because it's a bit like an insurance policy. The problem is, in reality, most of the women who are having egg freezing are having egg freezing in their late 30s and so by that stage you can freeze the eggs but the quality is much poorer and the chances of succeeding is much reduced.

"So that's why... you don't do it when you don't realise you should, and by the time you do realise you should it's later than you would have liked. It's not a very comfortable place to be so certainly the sooner, the better. And I'd certainly encourage anyone to check."

Oh, baby!


"The best age to have a baby is in your 20s," Dr Walsh said. "It's higher risk in the teens and it's higher risk in the 30s, and then obviously in the 40s. Having said that you can mitigate that risk. Because women are having babies older, while you acknowledge they're at higher risk, you monitor them more aggressively, you do more scans, you do everything more often, so

generally you can soften and mitigate that risk. The first thing is acknowledge it and then do something about it."

Boosting fertility

"We work with a nutritionist called Marilyn Glenville and one of her thesis is that intensive farming has leached certain elements out of the soil, therefore she recommends supplements for couples who are actually trying. They would be to replace those supplements for both men and women to heighten their fertility, so things like magnesium and selenium... they are needed for sperm quality.

"Treat endometriosis if it's there. Use the pill, the pill is useful because the pill suppresses endometriosis and it does a great job in that regard, and people don't even realise they had it but the pill has protected them from it.

"I don't think that there's much else in the 20s that you can do. Once you're getting into a more 'we're thinking of having a baby' mindset, there's three elements to really look at: the sperm, the egg and the uterus." 

"The pill is a great intervention. It has helped so many women who didn't realise they had hidden endometriosis come off the pill, get pregnant a lot faster than they would have done otherwise. There's no evidence of any harmful effect in regard to fertility. It protects fertility." - Dr David Welsh

The Pill...