

Fertility After 40

by Suzanne Spiry | January 14, 2005

Actress Jane Seymour gave birth to twins at age 45. Actress Susan Sarandon had her third child at 45. And Courteney Cox Arquette had a baby girl two days shy of her 40th birthday. With the swell of celebrity moms having babies in their forties, one might think that maybe the "fertility decreases after age 35" rule no longer applies. Not so, according to fertility experts who say that in fact, only about 2% of babies in the U.S. are born to mothers over the age of 40. Many older celebrity moms, including Seymour, have acknowledged undergoing fertility treatments, but such treatments offer notoriously poor chances for success in women over 40. Daniel Grow, MD, chief of Reproductive Endocrinology for Baystate Reproductive Medicine, discusses fertility after age 40, and what options are available to women wishing to conceive.

How much is a woman's fertility impacted by age 40?

It is a biological fact that fertility decreases with advancing maternal age. The chance of becoming pregnant in any single month is about 25% in a woman under 30, but only about 5% for women after 40. There are several reasons for this change in fertility, including gynecologic disorders (fibroids, endometriosis), infection, medical conditions and changes in the eggs released by the ovaries. As a woman matures into the late 30s and early 40s, the eggs inside the ovaries undergo changes that are not reversible. This often results in eggs with chromosome problems. When chromosomally abnormal eggs are released, and fertilized, the embryo that results is less likely to survive and grow. Should a chromosomally abnormal embryo lead to pregnancy, miscarriage is likely. Women aged 40 are 3 times more likely to miscarry than women aged 30.

After trying to conceive naturally, at what point should a woman over age 40 consult with a reproductive endocrinologist about options for conception?

Because of the higher rate of gynecologic disease and ovarian aging, a woman over age 35 should seek help sooner than younger women. A reproductive endocrinologist is a gynecologist who has received several years of additional training to treat reproductive problems and infertility. If pregnancy does not occur after six months of trying, a complete evaluation should be performed. This includes attention to any medical problems (high blood pressure, diabetes, etc.) and several fertility tests. A hysterosalpingogram to evaluate the uterus and fallopian tubes, a semen analysis, and a hormonal test (FSH) to assess ovarian health can all be completed in as little as one month.

What options are available locally through the specialists at Baystate Reproductive Medicine for a woman over age 40 who is having trouble conceiving?

Baystate Reproductive Medicine comprises a team of four board certified reproductive endocrinologists, seven infertility nurses, eight reproductive biologists, three ultrasonographers, an infertility counselor, and an insurance coordinator, who together provide a full spectrum of care for male and female factor infertility.

When difficulty conceiving is encountered, an early evaluation offers the best chance of successful treatment. If a cause for infertility is identified, the physicians may suggest a specific medical treatment or surgical procedure. For many couples, the chance for conception is increased using super ovulation medicines and intra-uterine insemination. Other times, in vitro fertilization (IVF) may be recommended. If the male is older and has a very low sperm count, IVF with intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) may be advised, or donor sperm can be used. In cases of premature ovarian failure or when other treatment options have not succeeded, donor egg services can be considered. (When eggs from a younger woman are used, pregnancy rates are approximately 50% per month.) Gestational carrier services can be used for a woman without a uterus or with severe medical conditions. Laparoscopy, hysteroscopy, and microsurgical procedures on the uterus, ovaries and fallopian tubes are performed when needed. Infertility at any age can be stressful and counseling or support groups are routinely available. All of these services are available at Baystate Reproductive Medicine in Springfield.

Baystate Reproductive Medicine is an Assisted Reproductive Technology program offering comprehensive infertility services with a mission to provide the best possible care for each individual patient. We offer state-of-the-art fertility treatments including ovulation induction, intrauterine insemination, in vitro fertilization, intracytoplasmic sperm injection, assisted hatching, donor egg, and gestational carrier services. For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call 413-794-7045.