



Struggling to Conceive

Rachel Sanders

Amanda and David Clegg only realized how desperately they wanted a child when they discovered they might not be able to have one.

Like many women of her generation, Amanda postponed thinking about having kids until she was in her mid-30s, wanting to finish school, establish a career and buy a home before starting a family.

“Once I got all those ducks in a row, I wanted that final piece of the puzzle,” she shares. But after trying for a year to conceive and undergoing a number of tests, their doctor diagnosed the Cleggs with unexplained infertility.

“I realized at that point that a baby wasn’t the final piece of the puzzle, it was the only piece that mattered.” Clegg continues. “I suddenly knew that this was the only thing in life I wanted. And I had this awful fear it would never happen.”

Amanda and Dave’s experience is hardly unique. Dr. Al Yuzpe, co-director of Vancouver’s Genesis Fertility Centre, estimates that somewhere between one in six and one in seven couples have difficulty conceiving.

And for many of those couples, the thought of seeking infertility treatment is daunting and overwhelming.

“There were some studies done that showed a lot of couples don’t seek help at all because they don’t know how to go about getting it,” says Dr. Yuzpe. “They are

frightened off by a lack of knowledge about what needs to be done to do an investigation, what the various treatments are, [the fact] that everything isn’t expensive and so on.”

For many people, the words “fertility treatment” call to mind expensive and invasive in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures. But according to Yuzpe, there’s a wide range of causes for fertility problems, not all of which require expensive treatments.

“The number of couples that need IVF relative to the number of couples who are having fertility problems to begin with is probably small,” he says. “Maybe only 15 or 20 percent. There are all kinds of issues that could be present that would not necessarily need IVF.”

Where Infertility Lies

When it comes to males and females, the numbers are fairly equal. Approximately 40 percent of cases of infertility can be attributed to the male partner and 45 percent to the female partner. Fifteen percent relate to a combination of factors, some of which are unexplainable.

On the female side, problems stemming from irregular ovulation can often be resolved with the use of medications. Other conditions, including blockages or abnormalities of the fallopian tubes can sometimes be treated with surgery.

Male problems, such as blockages of the vas deferens (a muscular tube that connects the testicles to the urethra) or the

epididymis (a series of small tubes attached to the back of each testicle) can also be cleared with surgery. And fertility medications can sometimes be used to increase sperm production.

But Yuzpe advises that problems on the male side are often the ones that require intrauterine insemination procedures, or the more complex in vitro treatments.

“Many of the male issues are not correctable by any other means, and that’s where ICSI [intracytoplasmic sperm injection] comes in,” he says. “It’s the biggest breakthrough in the treatment of male infertility that has ever occurred.”

ICSI is an in vitro fertilization procedure in which a single sperm is injected directly into an egg, rather than with the conventional IVF, where the sperm is simply combined with an egg in a Petri dish.

But there’s still another side to infertility, and that side makes up a large percentage of the cases seen by the Genesis Fertility Centre: advanced maternal age. Couples like the Cleggs are simply waiting until later in life to have babies, and it’s affecting their chances.

“Age is the biggest stumbling block that prevents us from helping couples achieve a pregnancy,” Yuzpe shares.

“Women should know that. It shouldn’t be their only deciding factor...but women should know their chance of getting pregnant in any cycle is 20 percent, but once

they get beyond 35 years of age, their pregnancy rate will go down by about nine percent from what it was the year before.”

Beyond Modern Medicine

Pregnancy and birth is supposed to be natural. And for some couples, modern or western medicine is a last resort, or something that should at least be combined with more natural methods. Vancouver’s AcuBalance Wellness Centre sees a lot of older couples seeking naturopathic treatments for fertility.

The Centre’s Dr. Lorne Brown, a doctor of Chinese medicine, uses techniques such as acupuncture, herbs and qi gong (a component of traditional Chinese medicine that combines movement, meditation and breathing methods to treat matters of reproductive health).

“We’re about promoting health and vitality,” says Brown. “You don’t have to have a diagnosis of infertility to see us. Some people are 38 or 39 and they know that based on their age, it may be difficult [to have children], and they just want to improve their overall health and increase their chances of conceiving.”

But some of the patients at AcuBalance do have fertility problems. And though they may not be able to find the answer as to why, they still want the solution.

“Often we see patients who have unexplained infertility,” shares Brown. “We put the body into balance, increase the blood flow to the reproductive organs so more blood reaches the eggs, and hopefully the result is better egg quality.”

But he still recognizes other, more invasive techniques. “Some of the western techniques like in vitro fertilization are really great for when someone has a structural issue, like no fallopian tubes.”

In fact, Chinese medicine and naturopathic treatments can also be helpful in combination for people who are undergoing IVF and other western treatments.

“Our focus is to prepare the body,” explains Brown. “The drugs for IVF, for example, only work in the last two weeks before the actual treatment takes place, but the foundation’s ready much earlier than that. We have found out in current western

science that the quality of the egg is determined three months before ovulation.”

Dr. Yuzpe says that it is as yet difficult to find scientific studies concerning various naturopathic techniques, such as acupuncture’s effect on pregnancy rates. “But we have no evidence that acupuncture has any negative effect,” he says. “So from that standpoint it’s good. If some people find that it makes them feel better, if it relaxes them or whatever, that’s great.”

Ultimately, Yuzpe urges couples that suspect they may have fertility problems to investigate their options.

“A younger couple that’s having regular intercourse should feel quite comfortable that after trying for a year, it’s possibly worth looking into,” he says.

“But as a woman gets beyond the age of 35, and gets to 40, it may be worth looking into her fertility status much sooner.”

As for the Clegg’s, after an operation to resolve a testicular vein condition and three rounds of IVF, they finally got what they were after. And just ten months ago, baby daughter Charlotte was born.

“Ever since then, I’ve felt this sense of completeness,” says Mom with a huge smile. “All that stuff we went through with IVF and infertility, it all just seems like nothing now that we have Charlotte, and she’s a happy healthy baby.”

For More Information

- acubalance.ca
- genesis-fertility.com
- assistedconception.ca
- iaac.ca

This article offers only a small glance into infertility. If you’re experiencing conception problems, make an appointment with your doctor to discuss your options.

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