

UNDERSTANDING INFERTILITY

BY POH SU LIN

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Fertility is often taken for granted. However, inadequate nutrition, lifestyle and work stresses as well as real diseases of the reproductive system may impair either the male or female's ability to reproduce!

Eighty-five per cent of couples get pregnant within 12 months of unprotected sexual intercourse. For the rest, a variety of tests can decipher the cause and help them conceive.

Dr Ann Tan, the first Singaporean to hold the Diploma of Foetal Medicine from the Foetal Medicine Foundation, shares the importance of pre-pregnancy and infertility screening. The dedicated gynaecologist and obstetrician has won several prestigious awards including the HMDP Scholarship for Foetal Echocardiography at Yale School of Medicine in 1995.

Female infertility is on the rise as many women delay trying to get pregnant. Other factors include not ovulating, blocked fallopian tubes, poor quality eggs, or endometriosis (a condition where the tissues that line the inside of the womb are found outside it).

Male infertility can result from having a low sperm count, reduced sperm movement, or abnormally shaped sperm.

"Pre-pregnancy screening tests may identify medical issues that may impact fertility or be dangerous for the embryo, eg diabetes mellitus or thyroid diseases. In essence, optimising both partners' health will ensure greater success at conception," explained Dr Tan.

Females are screened with an ultrasound of the pelvis, and tubal patency tests. Blood tests are also done to screen her ovarian function and exclude medical disorders like thyroid diseases or autoimmune disorders. A detailed menstrual diary can help the doctor ascertain the patient's fertile period.

For men, the doctor will also need to have a review of his medical history and lifestyle habits. The presence of physical signs of hormone deficiency i.e. increased fatigue, decreased libido, a history of injury to the testicles during childhood and/or mumps will be taken into consideration. Detailed Semen Analysis will be required to assess the health and quality of the sperm.

There are different routes to treat and overcome infertility, depending on the needs of the couple. In fact, most couples may need help with merely timing the act of copulation, with or without medication and surgery. So if you plan to have a baby, get screened earlier to avoid time wasted in not identifying and addressing potential issues.



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