

Social Egg Freezing- Race Against Time and Nature's Gender Inequality?

Social egg freezing is the term used for non-medical egg freezing/oocyte cryopreservation. The use of social egg freezing is on the rise worldwide as a “back-up plan” or “fertility insurance”. This increase has been linked to a number of complex and interrelated reasons for delayed childbearing, including personal, professional, financial and psychological.

Career advancement, current lack of a partner or a stable relationship, insufficient funds to raise a family are the various reasons stated for social egg freezing.

The Need?

For human eggs, unlike sperms, there is a definite decline in quality and quantity after the age of 30, which plummets after 35. It becomes increasingly difficult for older women to get pregnant either on their own or by the use of assisted reproduction. The best time to freeze eggs would be by early 30s. Social egg freezing is typically offered to women under the age of 38 years who want to keep the option of having genetically-related children later in life open.

The Process

We have been using egg freezing from late 1990s for fertility preservation of cancer patients. Egg freezing is a process that involves the hormonal stimulation of the ovaries with injections, followed by transvaginal retrieval and subsequent freezing and storage of a woman's viable eggs. Later, whenever she plans to get pregnant, the eggs are thawed, fertilized and transferred to the uterus/womb as embryos.

Efficacy

Although egg freezing can occur using slow-freezing or vitrification (flash-freezing) , the latter technology is recommended as it increases egg survival when thawed and gives improved pregnancy rates. The survival rate of eggs after vitrification and thawing is 90%–97%, the fertilization rate is 71%–79% and the implantation rate is 17%–41%. The chances of becoming pregnant after implantation are roughly 30 to 60 %, depending on your age at the time of egg freezing. Importantly, the older you are at the time of egg freezing, the lower the likelihood that you'll have a live birth in the future.

Cost

The cost of egg freezing would be around Rs 1.25-1.5 lacs plus the cost of injections. The yearly storage cost comes to around Rs 30,000-50,000, depending on the number of eggs stored.

Health Risks

The health risks include those occurring from ovarian stimulation and egg retrieval under anesthesia. There is a possibility of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome which varies from mild to severe. Signs and symptoms include mild abdominal pain, bloating, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Even more rarely, it's possible to develop a more severe form of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome that can also cause fluid to collect in your abdomen and chest, shortness of breath, blood clots, and you may need hospitalization and intensive care.

The links of ovarian stimulation to various cancers like ovarian, breast and uterine have not been proved and there are limited and conflicting reports.

The egg-to-baby rate is around 6.5% – the chance that one frozen egg from one fertile young woman will result in one baby.

It goes without saying that women who have undergone egg freezing will need to use In Vitro Fertilization/IVF whenever they want to become pregnant.

