

PATIENT'S FACT SHEET

Stress And Infertility

Stress is defined as any event that a person perceives as threatening or harmful. Stress can result in the heightened activity of many body organs. This increased activity is offset by hormones secreted by the adrenal glands and through the nervous system. Acute stress can result in increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration, as well as sweaty palms and cool, clammy skin. Chronic stress can also cause depression and result in changes in the immune system and sleep patterns.

STRESS CAUSING INFERTILITY

Although infertility is a highly stressful experience, there is very little evidence that infertility can be caused by stress. In rare cases, high levels of stress in women can change hormone levels and cause irregular ovulation. Some studies have shown that high stress levels may also cause fallopian tube spasm in women and decreased sperm production in men.

INFERTILITY CAUSING STRESS

Research has shown that women undergoing treatment for infertility have a similar, and often higher, level of "stress" as women dealing with life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and heart disease. Infertile couples experience chronic stress each month, first hoping that they will conceive and then dealing with the disappointment if they do not.

WHY INFERTILITY IS STRESSFUL

When diagnosed with infertility, many couples may no longer feel in control of their bodies or their life plan. Infertility can be a major crisis because the important life goal of parenthood is threatened. Most couples are accustomed to planning their lives. Experience has shown them that if they work hard at something, they can achieve it. With infertility, this may not be the case. Infertility testing and treatments can be physically, emotionally, and financially stressful. A couple's intimacy is often reduced by the infertility experience, which further contributes to increased stress levels. Trying to coordinate medical appointments with career responsibilities can also increase pressures on infertile couples.

TIPS FOR STRESS REDUCTION

- Keep the lines of communication open with your partner.
- Get emotional support so that you don't feel isolated. Individual or couple counseling, support groups, and books on infertility can help validate your feelings and help you cope. RESOLVE is a national support organization for couples with infertility. For information on local chapters, you can reach them at 1310 Broadway, Somerville, Massachusetts 02144; (617) 623-0744.
- Learn stress reduction techniques such as meditation or yoga.
- Avoid excessive intake of caffeine and other stimulants.
- Exercise regularly to release physical and emotional tension.
- Have a medical treatment plan that both you and your partner are comfortable with.
- Learn as much as you can about the cause of your infertility and the treatment options available. Check with your local library, bookstores, and contact the ASRM for additional information on infertility.