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By Sarah Gudmanson

Talking about male infertility

There are some issues that couples just don't look forward to discussing, and the topic of infertility is on that list if the couple happens to be trying to conceive without results. Perhaps it's because neither person wants to be labeled as the one with a problem. But a couple working together to have a baby should also approach issues of infertility as a team, says Stephen F. Shaban, M.D., of North Carolina Urological Associates. Finding out if there is even a problem, what that problem is and what options you have is going to make everyone involved feel better.

WHAT IS MALE INFERTILITY?

"Infertility is when a couple has tried to conceive for approximately one year without success," says Shaban, since most couples trying to conceive do so within that time frame. "Male infertility is when a male partner in an infertile couple is diagnosed as being infertile."

On average, 15 percent of couples will be diagnosed as infertile, says Shaban, and of that 15 percent, 30 to 50 percent of infertility is attributed to the male.

THE FIRST STEP: SEE A DOCTOR

"Until a couple tries to have kids and can't, fertility isn't an issue and it's something that is taken for granted. It's only when they can't get pregnant that it becomes a huge deal and an emotional issue for the couple involved and for the friends and family that provide emotional support," says Shaban.

So if a couple's year-long attempts to conceive haven't panned out, Shaban suggests they both go to the doctor. "If the woman goes to the doctor and they run tests and find out six months down the road that she seems fine, that is six months you've lost."

Shaban recommends men visit a urologist who has experience in infertility, and his clients tend to fall between the ages of 22 years old to mid-40s. The basic work up for fertility testing includes a complete health history, physical and sexual history, semen analyses and blood work to obtain a male hormonal profile.

MALE INFERTILITY CAUSES

There are many possible causes of male infertility, and some are more common than others. Shaban says some typical causes of male infertility include scrotal varicoceles (dilation of veins inside the scrotum), undescended testes or torsion of the testis during adolescence, reproductive duct blockage, lifestyle practices (such as frequent use of hot tubs), undersized testes, adult mumps, STDs, illicit drug abuse or anabolic steroid use.

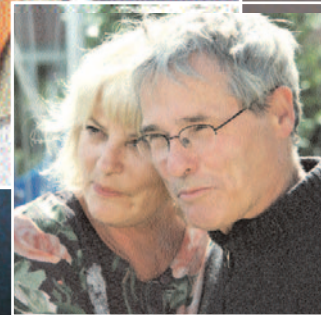
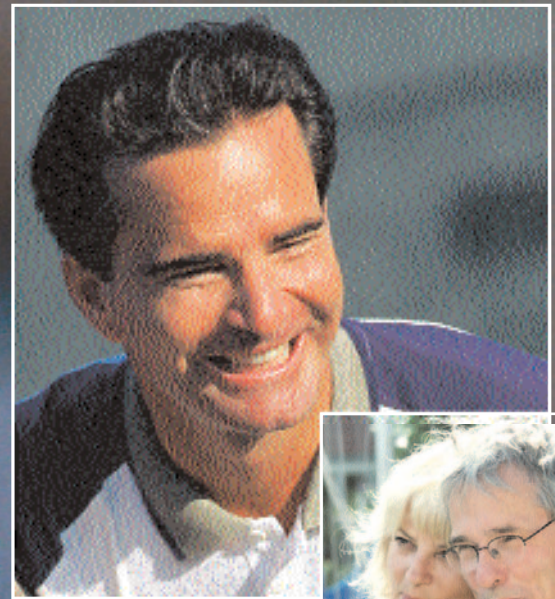
INFERTILITY TREATMENTS

"The longer you put off going to the doctor, the longer it will take to get a diagnosis of the problem and begin treatment," says Shaban, which can be as simple as making lifestyle changes. Other infertility treatments include micro-surgical reconstruction of blocked reproduction ducts, microsurgical varicoceles repair, and hormone treatment, in addition to working with the woman's fertility specialist to coordinate simple intrauterine inseminations or invitro fertilization.

WHAT INFERTILE DOES NOT MEAN

Shaban says one reason many people are hesitant to discuss fertility is that social and cultural stigmas are sometimes associated with being infertile. He says the idea that men or women with fertility problems are less masculine or feminine is a complete misconception.

Shaban advises any couple with concerns about fertility to search the internet. "There is so much information out there. No, not everything is true, but there are some good sources. If a couple does some research, they will come to the doctor more informed and they may know what questions to ask."



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