

UC Health Center for Reproductive Health

Guide for Your Fertility Journey

Navigating Your Journey

Fertility treatments can seem like a different universe – one with its own language, customs and experiences. As you navigate this journey, the most important thing to remember is that you are not alone. There is a team of doctors, nurses and medical staff to guide you along your path. You also have family and friends who want to support you, even if they don't quite know how.

Whether you are in the beginning, middle or nearing the end of your fertility treatments, spend a few minutes learning how you can navigate the emotions of infertility.

Understanding Fertility Conditions

Infertility: No other word can cause so much heartache, stress and anxiety. However, before you begin treatments, it's important for you to understand what is causing your infertility – not only so your doctor can create plan that is right for you, but so that you can learn what to expect at each step of your journey.

Common causes and treatments of infertility include:

- Problems releasing an egg (ovulation)
- Pain with your period (endometriosis)
- Blocked or damaged tubes
- Unexplained fertility problems
- Male infertility
- Older age

Problems with Ovulation

If your menstrual cycle is irregular, your ovaries may not be releasing eggs during every cycle. Medicines, such as clomiphene or metformin, may be used to help stimulate ovulation or treat issues preventing ovulation, like polycystic ovary syndrome.

Endometriosis

This is a condition when the uterine lining develops outside the uterus. It can cause painful cramping and make it difficult to become pregnant. If you have endometriosis, your doctor may talk to you about a surgical procedure called laparoscopy. This minimally invasive procedure removes scar tissue outside your uterus, and helps improve your fertility.

Blocked or Damaged Tubes

Your doctor may recommend a tubal surgery if your fallopian tubes are blocked or damaged. The most common causes of blocked fallopian tubes include scar tissue (often from endometriosis), past infections or pelvic adhesions.

Unexplained Infertility

If your doctor can't find a clear reason why you can't get pregnant, you may be diagnosed with unexplained fertility. Treatment for unexplained infertility often includes taking medicine, such as clomiphene or hormone injections, to help stimulate ovulation and support insemination and pregnancy.

Male Infertility

Male infertility causes about 30-40 percent of all fertility problems. It can happen when there is an issue with a mans sperm, including low sperm count or low mobility. Treatment may include surgery, hormone treatments or medications or assisted reproductive technology, such as intrauterine insemination (IUI) or in vitro insemination (IVF).

Age

A woman's fertility peaks at the age of 25, and begins to decline from there. Women who are 35 years and older often have a more difficult time conceiving than younger women. Doctors often recommend that women over the age of 35 seek medical consultation after six months of unsuccessfully trying to conceive.

The Right Diagnosis

All of the above are just a few of the common causes of fertility problems among women. Your doctor will work closely with you – asking detailed questions about your personal and family medical history, menstrual cycle and other symptoms you may be experiencing.

You will also receive a complete exam, including a pelvic exam to check for abnormalities and blood tests to check hormone levels. Based on your initial appointment, your doctor may order additional tests, including a sperm count for your partner.

These tests are utilized to understand the origin/cause of your fertility issues and to help map your journey.

The Emotional Journey to Fertility

It's estimated that roughly one in six women experience infertility. While that's reassuring to know others are experiencing similar challenges, it's also important to keep in mind that no two journeys are the same. You have every right to feel every emotion you feel and make the best choices for you and your family – regardless of what worked for one friend, or what a family member swears by.

Prepare for your emotional journey by spending time talking with your doctor, researching your fertility condition and your suggested treatment plan, and being honest with your partner, family and friends. The people you surround yourself with on your journey to fertility will be the ones that encourage and support you every step of the way.

Starting Your Journey

Starting fertility treatment can be an emotionally and financially stressful time. Research has found that women with fertility issues are just as anxious and depressed as women with cancer, HIV or heart disease.

Fertility treatments can be financially demanding as well. Because insurance does not always cover treatment, it is recommended that you talk with your doctor's office (often a good resource) and insurance company to navigate your benefits. You are also invited to contact Mary Lawson, financial counselor for the UC Health Center for Reproductive Health, by calling (513) 475-6833 or emailing mary.lawson2@UCHealth.com.

Only you and your partner can decide when it's right to start the treatment plan recommended by your doctor. Spend some time considering the following questions to help you manage the journey ahead:

- Are you and your partner on the same page about your treatment plan?
- Have you determined if insurance will cover treatments?
- Are you prepared to pay for treatments that insurance does not cover?
- Do you have support in place before you begin treatment? Support can come from a friend or family member that you are able to talk candidly to, or a local support group.

Keeping Your Relationship Healthy

It's important to stay focused on your relationship during your fertility treatments. Both you and your partner will likely experience some stress and guilt. Try to spend time with each other to keep your relationship healthy and strong, in order for to continue to support one another throughout treatment. Below are some easy ways to keep your partnership healthy.

- Avoid blame. It doesn't matter why you and your partner are struggling to conceive. What truly matters is that you are there for one another. Talk to each other, support one another and continue to be there for each other.
- Check in with each other regularly. Ask how the other is doing, and be honest about your own feelings.

- Make time for each other. It can be easy to get caught up in the stress and schedule of fertility treatments, not to mention every day life. Be sure you and your partner make time for each other. It can be a dinner out or a relaxing night in. And if you need a break from thinking or talking about fertility treatments, consider taking a break from talking about fertility.
- Respect each other. Keep in mind that your partner may not respond to stress and fertility treatment exactly as you do. Allow him/her to process feelings in a way that feels right for them, while still respecting your feelings.

During Fertility Treatment

It is perfectly normal and understandable to experience ups and downs throughout fertility treatment. Your body is going through physical and emotional changes daily – how you feel will fluctuate along with those changes.

When you experience changing or intense emotions, please keep in mind two important things:

- Give yourself permission to feel whatever it is you are feeling.
- Have an honest conversation with someone about your feelings.

Your emotions may range from excitement, eagerness and happiness to grief, jealousy and anxiety. Each and every one of these emotions is valid. It's important to note that you are possibly experiencing what may be one of the most stressful times in your life.

When you have strong feelings, allow yourself to actually feel them. Do not try to shut feelings off or distract yourself. Effective, productive ways can help you experience these emotions and enable you to feel stronger and ready for your next appointment.

Find your support.

It's helpful to talk about your fertility struggles with someone other than your partner. Find a supportive friend or family member that you know you can always turn to and be heard.

One of the many frustrating things about fertility treatments is that well-meaning friends and family often have advice to give you, when what you really need is someone to just listen. If you can't find someone to just listen – keep trying. You'll find the person who listens to you in a judgment-free zone and is there for you, no matter what.

Eat healthy.

A well-rounded, nutritious diet is an important part of your fertility plan. Your doctor most likely has talked to you about which foods to avoid, and which you should eat. Eating a healthy diet complete with fruits, vegetables, protein, wheat and dairy can give you the energy you need to feel your best.

Stay active.

Just like good nutrition, your fertility doctor has likely already talked to you about staying active during fertility treatments. While you may want to skip scuba diving, skydiving and even intense running, other activities like walking and swimming are perfectly safe to do during fertility treatments. Physical activity is a great way to help relieve stress and keep you focused on the next steps in your fertility plan.

Take care of yourself.

You're juggling appointments and medicines on top of your every day life. Be sure you make time to care for yourself. Make time for the activities you love, and make you a priority.

Talk to a professional.

To say that fertility treatments are an emotional journey can be an understatement. Sometimes, you need to talk to someone more than a friend or a family member. A licensed therapist or psychologist can help you make sense of your emotions, and help you find effective ways to cope. Your doctor or nurse may even be able to recommend a professional with experience treating women who struggle with fertility.

Develop calming strategies.

The pressure and weight of fertility treatments can build and sometimes it may feel like just a little too much. When that happens, use a few tried and true calming strategies to help you get focused again. Some common calming strategies include: deep breathing, yoga, meditation, listening to music and gentle stretching. Try several different strategies until you find the one that works best for you.

Start a journal.

A journal can be as detailed as entries that last several pages to as simple as one-word entries or drawings. It's a great way to capture and express your emotions, and can even serve as a record when your journey is complete.

Educate yourself.

Learning more about your fertility condition or upcoming fertility treatments may seem a little overwhelming at first. But, it can help you feel more confident and comfortable during each of your doctor's visit. Ask your doctor or nurse for reputable sites where you can read more about your condition and treatment. Take home and review any materials you receive, and always ask any question you have.

Sharing Your Fertility Story with Family and Friends

It can be difficult to decide when to tell family and friends, and which people you want to tell. Keep in mind that your fertility journey is just that – your journey. You don't need to tell everyone you know, unless that is what helps you.

If you are unsure of what to say, consider testing the waters with close family or friends first. Here are some tips for making that conversation go smoothly:

- Decide ahead of time what you want to share. It can be as little or as much as you want. Thinking about what you want to tell others ahead of time can make it a little easier for you.
- Tell people what you need. Your friends and family are going to want to help you and be there however they can. Help them by letting them know exactly what you need. Want them to ask questions? Let them know. Prefer it if they waited until you brought up your fertility treatments before they ask? Then tell them that too.
- Be honest. If certain topics or events are hard for you, like pregnancy announcements, baby showers or kid birthday parties, then let your family and friends know. Explain that some activities are just too hard to deal with right now, and ask them to be patient with you as you navigate your fertility treatments.

Concluding Your Journey

Your personal fertility journey will be full of different phases and stages. It is your decision as to when and how you take each one of those steps. Your doctor will help guide you through each treatment possibility, making recommendations about what may work best. The final decision, however, remains with you and your partner.

No clear, obvious way exists that tells you when it is time to move on to the next phase – whether that is starting intrauterine insemination (IUI), moving onto to in-vitro fertilization (IVF), trying new medicines or simply taking a break from treatment.

In some cases, couples choose to decide before beginning a new treatment when they will take a break and reassess the plan. This could be after completing three IUI cycles or two IVF cycles – this decision is made by you and your partner.

Decisions about fertility treatments can be some of the most difficult choices you make in life. Take your time as you consider each option. Take your doctor's advice into consideration and, just as importantly, listen to yourself and your instincts.