

Infertility: When trying to have a baby drains you emotionally and physically

Jean Moore | July 29, 2016

Seven years.

That's how long Elissa and Dan Goodkin tried to conceive a baby before they had their twin daughters a year ago.

The Oak Park couple went through a series of expensive, sometimes uncomfortable, treatments and three miscarriages before they finally conceived the girls through in vitro fertilization, or IVF. It was an emotional, difficult, lonely journey — one that more couples are taking these days, but one that many still don't talk about, even with their immediate families.

"There's no one to talk to," Dan Goodkin, 41, said. "You go through financial exhaustion, physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion. ... It's difficult."

Doctors point to a shift in society to explain the increase: People are getting married and starting families later in life. That's one of the main reasons that at least one in eight couples today are struggling to conceive, said Dr. Gary Hubert, who treated the Goodkins.

"Women in their mid- to late 30s are deciding they want to have a family, but the probability is less than when they were younger," Hubert said.

Another result: More babies are being born through IVF than a decade ago. In 2014, the latest year that statistics are available, 65,175 babies were born through IVF, according

to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. In 2004, it was 49,458 — roughly 15,700 fewer.

The surge in women seeking help for infertility has prompted a corresponding boom in medical centers that treat the disease, including at least four in Ventura County. Hubert's group, Fertility & Surgical Associates of California, for example, has three offices spread across Southern California.

Other clinics are even bigger. The **Southern California Reproductive Center**, which has an office in Ventura, has six other locations. HRC Fertility Treatment Clinics has nine offices, including one in Westlake Village.

"There's constant growth in the number of fertility treatment centers," said Dr. Richard Paulson, a professor of reproductive medicine at USC and the president-elect of the society. "It's increasing every year."

That means people seeking help for infertility should do their homework before choosing a clinic, looking for doctors who are board certified and labs that are accredited, Paulson said. And if they're not happy with the first doctor they see, they should find another, he said.

"Couples should seek second opinions, find where they're happy," he said.

Doctors advise couples to seek treatment if they haven't conceived after a year of trying. If the woman is over 35, they may want to seek treatment after six months.

Generally, women are most fertile when they're 25 or so. There's a steep drop around age 35, and another steep drop after 40, Hubert said.

"Then, after 45, it's really difficult to have a baby," he said.

That's why Dr. Robert Boostanfar believes women should talk with their doctors about family planning, right along with contraception, during their annual checkups. They may also want to have their ovarian function tested, he said.

"We've got to back up the education," said Boostanfar, who is part of the HRC Fertility group, with an office in Westlake Village. "Women who are younger may not know their ovarian function is diminishing."

Paulson would move that education even further back — to high school.

"I think that sex education in high school should include contraception and also information about infertility, including the biological clock," he said in an email.

Factors besides age can also make it difficult for couples to conceive, including physical issues such as uterine fibroids or low sperm counts. Lifestyle, including diet, smoking and drinking, may also play a role. So can the woman's weight, whether it's high or low.

But the Goodkins didn't fit into any of those at-risk groups. Elissa, now 36, was only 28 when they started trying to have a baby. Neither has ever smoked or taken drugs. Neither is over- or underweight. After all the tests and treatments, they never did figure out why they were having trouble conceiving.

Treating infertility

Generally, in about a third of infertility cases, the issue will lie with the woman, and in another third with the man, according to the society. With the rest, it's a mix, or sometimes — as with the Goodkins — doctors simply can't determine what the problem is.

In addition to heterosexual couples, doctors also are working with gay couples who may turn to other options, including sperm and egg donors, or surrogates to carry the baby.

"Same-sex couples come in fairly regularly," Paulson said. "That barrier was broken at the medical level so long ago."

With heterosexual couples, doctors generally start by testing both the man and woman for any problems that may be contributing to infertility. In many cases, they can treat infertility with a combination of medication and surgery. A doctor might prescribe medicine to stimulate ovulation in the woman or boost hormones in the man, for example. A woman might have surgery to treat uterine fibroids.

People tend to think of in vitro fertilization, or IVF, in connection with infertility, but less than 2 percent of babies in the U.S. are born through that method, according to the society.

Financial and emotional cost

In IVF, a woman's eggs are removed from her uterus, fertilized in a lab, and then the healthiest embryo or embryos are transplanted back into her uterus three to five days later.

The cost generally ranges from about \$13,000 to \$16,000. And that's for just one treatment. If patients need more treatments, they may be less expensive if they have frozen embryos.

Some insurance policies cover IVF, but few do. A few states require that insurance include IVF, but California is not among them, Paulson said.

The Goodkins turned to IVF after trying other treatments. It took five cycles, and they finally succeeded after doing genetic testing on the embryos. That was expensive, but ultimately worth it, they said.

"Once we did the genetic testing, these two arrived," Dan said. "We didn't ask about their gender; we just wanted healthy ones."

In addition to the financial cost, there's also an enormous emotional cost to infertility, doctors say. That's why treatment routinely includes counseling.

"The emotional aspect is bigger than anything," said Dr. Shahin Ghadir, with the Southern California Reproductive Center. "There's anxiety, depression, insecurity, frustration, denial."

Some people are open about their infertility, but others don't tell anyone, including their families and close friends, he said.

Ghadir suggests that people be open, so they give themselves a circle of support.

As for the people who love someone struggling with infertility? Be supportive, Ghadir said. Wait for them to give you information. Let them know you're available if they need you.

And don't ever ask someone if she's pregnant, he said.

"You have no idea who's trying, and who isn't, and who had a miscarriage last week," Ghadir said.

Like many couples struggling with infertility, the Goodkins endured questions and comments that weren't meant to be malicious but hurt.

"When are you two going to have a baby?"

"Don't you like children?"

And, "That biological clock is ticking."

"It's awful," Elissa said. "Just awful."

Eventually, they found it hard to be around friends who were having babies. Elissa stopped going to baby showers.

"There was only so long I could put on a happy face," she said.

For all of that, the seven years of treatments, expense and heartbreak ultimately were worth it, Elissa said as she watched her daughters explore the kitchen.

"As difficult as it was to go through, I appreciate them more than I would having them naturally," she said. "They can scream and cry, and I'm happy that they're here."

Infertility Facts

- About 15 percent of women of childbearing age have trouble conceiving, and that percentage goes up with age.
- In the U.S., 1.3 percent of babies are born through in vitro fertilization, or IVF.
- Infertility affects men and women equally.
- Smoking increases the risk of infertility and miscarriage.
- Twelve percent of infertility cases stem from women weighing too little or too much.

Source: American Society for Reproductive Medicine

Five things to never say to an infertile couple

1. "Just relax."

2. "Try IVF."

They may not be able to afford it.

3. "You can adopt."

That's a big decision, and they may not be there yet.

4. "Whose fault is it?"

5. "You're young. You have plenty of time to get pregnant."

For more advice on talking to infertile couples, [click here](#).

<http://www.vcstar.com/news/local/struggling-with-infertility-when-trying-to-have-a-baby-drains-you-emotionally-physically-and-finan-3--388685381.html>