

Fertile Ground

Infertility is a rising problem in the UAE: According to recent figures, one in five couples are facing issues related to the problem. We asked a renowned Harley Street fertility doctor to shed some light on the subject...

By Tracey Thompson and Yi-Hwa Hanna

So you and your partner had decided you finally want to start a family. Great. But despite the fact that you've been trying for what feels like forever, it just doesn't seem to be working. Something does not feel right. And with a sinking sensation in the pit of your stomach, you start to wonder if it might be time to seek professional help with the problem.

It's a familiar situation for more people than you'd think, particularly here in the United Arab Emirates, with recent studies showing that not only do one in every five couples have trouble conceiving, but that in more than 50% of cases, it's actually due to the man in the couple. The research, from Bourn Hall Fertility Clinic in the UAE, also found that a healthy fertile woman only has a 20% chance of getting pregnant per month—once she turns 40, this becomes less than 5%. But that doesn't mean you have to give up your hopes on having a family—experts claim that in many cases, it could actually even be down to lifestyle factors, and that even a few small changes could make a world of difference. It all starts with a fertility test, and the right kind of professional help from a fertility centre and specialist. We sat down with Dr. Geetha Venkat from the Harley Street Fertility Clinic in London after her visit to the Arab Health Exhibition earlier this year...

What are the main causes of infertility, and why do you think that there is such a high rate of it in the UAE?

One of the determining factors in infertility is maternal age, so if couples delay having children they will face more difficulty in conceiving. Other factors, such as lifestyle, particularly smoking or drugs, family history, inherited conditions or transmitted diseases will also affect a couple's fertility. The Middle East, including the UAE, has a higher incidence of obesity, in part possibly due to obesity being perceived as a sign of prosperity, which can cause infertility and hirsutism. [Ref: Balen et al., Expert Rev Endocrinol Metab. 2013;8(1):71-79.]

Why do you think men in the UAE are typically so reluctant to seek professional help? What advice would you give to them?

I would say this is mainly a cultural issue. In more traditional societies, people in general are reluctant to discuss fertility issues. Furthermore, this reluctance is heightened in men because they are supposed to be virile. I would encourage them to discuss any concerns they have with their partner or seek confidential medical advice. Ignoring the issue does not solve the problem. Fertility is a part of your biology and it is not something to be embarrassed about.

What are the telltale signs of infertility in both men and women?

There are no tell-tale signs beyond failing to achieve a pregnancy. However, I would advise men and women to be aware of their fertility by having a check-up. Making informed decisions and planning for major life events is always better than facing a crisis later.

What should people do in the first instance they suspect they are having trouble conceiving?

They should seek help. The first step would be to have a consultation with a fertility specialist, who could arrange some preliminary tests to assess the situation and provide useful advice.

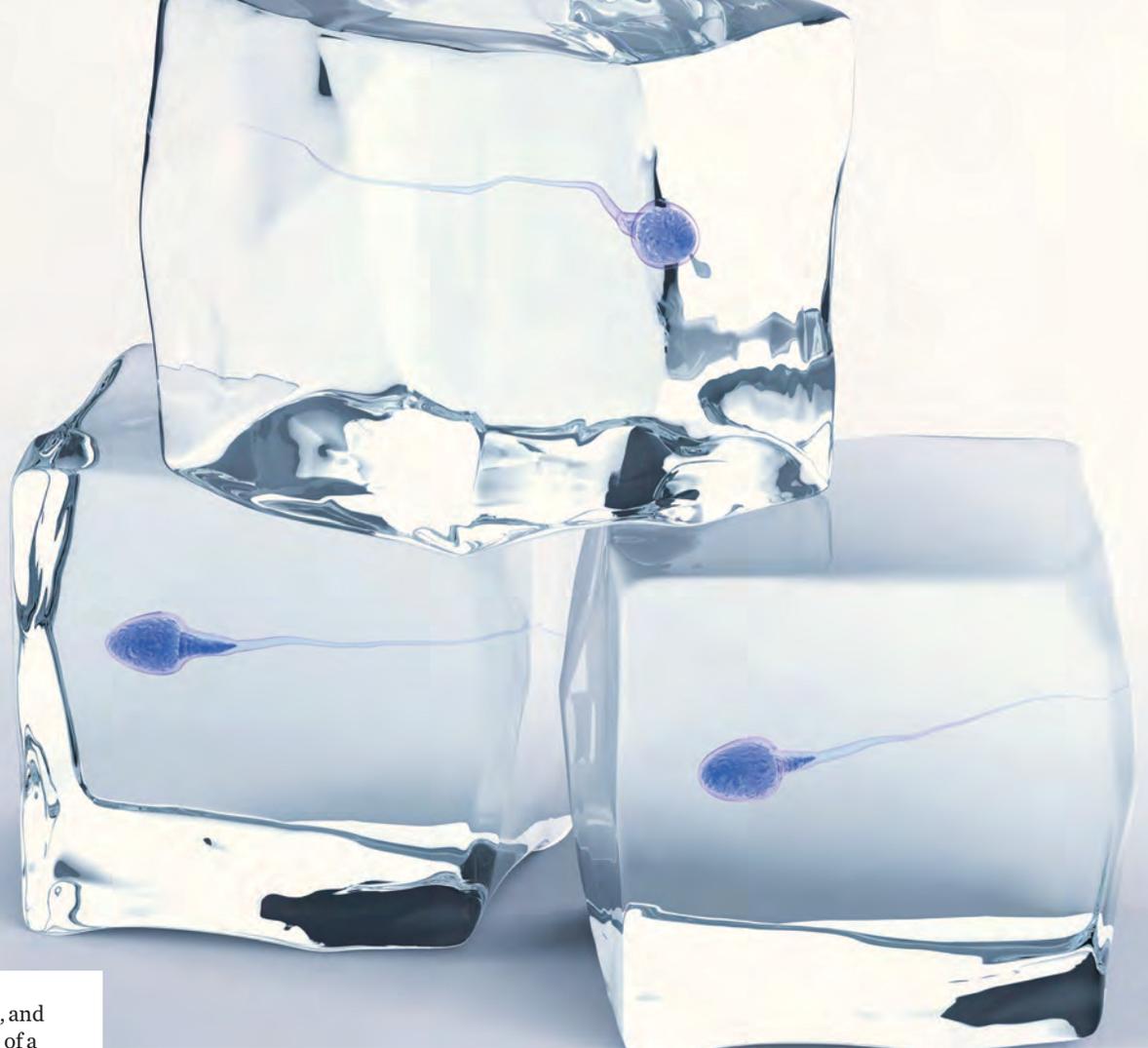
What are the most tried and tested treatments available currently?

The most tried and tested assisted conception treatments at the moment are intrauterine insemination (IUI) and in vitro fertilisation (IVF). IUI is a less invasive procedure whereby sperm is prepared in a lab and inseminated into the uterus around the time of ovulation to maximise the chances of successful fertilisation. Success rates for IUI vary from less than 5% to 25%. Young fertile couples will be towards the higher end of this range. IVF is a more invasive treatment whereby a woman's ovaries are stimulated with hormones to yield a good number of eggs. Those eggs are collected by a minor procedure and fertilised in a petri dish in a laboratory using prepared sperm. Hence the name in vitro or "in glass" fertilisation. Fertilised eggs are allowed to develop into embryos in the laboratory and the best one or two embryos are transferred into the uterus a few days later.

Success rates for IVF vary from 5% to 50%. Again, young fertile couples will be towards the higher end of this range.

Have there been any new and exciting research or treatments with regards to treating infertility in the last five to ten years?

There have been numerous developments in the field of assisted conception that help to improve the chances of success with each attempt. Two are particularly notable: 1. Pre-implantation genetic screening (PGS) is a technique which tests whether each embryo has the correct number of chromosomes (genetic material, DNA). A common cause of a failed IVF cycle after the transfer of a good quality embryo, i.e. failed implantation or miscarriage, is because that embryo did not contain the right number of chromosomes, so it was genetically abnormal. PGS allows us to check whether that embryo is genetically normal before we transfer, thereby, reducing the risk of miscarriage and increasing the chances of pregnancy. 2. Timelapse microscopy, which is often referred to by a trade name of Embryoscope. Traditionally, an embryologist will monitor the development of a patient's embryos by assessing them under the microscope once each day. Time lapse microscopy allows an embryologist to observe the development of embryos continuously: the device takes photographs of embryos every 10 minutes or so. This technique provides an embryologist with significantly more information about the development of an embryo and accordingly that embryo's quality and potential for successful implantation. This allows the embryologist to better choose which embryos



should be transferred, and increases the chances of a successful pregnancy.

What are some of the most common myths surrounding infertility? What are the facts?

There are plenty of myths surrounding fertility and these vary widely in each country and culture. I would always advise couples to seek support and professional advice rather than rely on hearsay or misinformed advice. The latter is particularly troublesome in the internet age – do not believe everything you read. Each couple's fertility is unique and you should investigate the matter before reaching any conclusions.

Professional treatment aside, what are some good 'top tips' for men and women to try to help them to conceive naturally?

As with any important matter in life, the most crucial advice I can provide about fertility is to have support, reduce or remove other sources of stress and focus on the task at hand. Most couples trying to get pregnant will have busy lives, involving work, friends and family. You need to take the time to focus on trying naturally and at the right time. Stress can be very detrimental to one's chances. With a little patience, support and the right help you will get there.

What role does yoga have to play in the treatment of infertility and why does it seem to be so effective?

Yoga can help focus the mind and relax the body. I believe preparing yourself for pregnancy or fertility treatment is very important. Yoga and or meditation can help you achieve both.

What would you say to any women reading this who think they may have fertility issues?

You are not alone. Approximately one in seven couples having regular unprotected sex will struggle to get pregnant within a year. Talk openly with your partner. Seek professional advice because this will provide you with some reassurance and a clearer picture.

What's a typical work day like for you?

Like most doctors, I must admit I love my work and am therefore a bit of a workaholic. I am in theatre most mornings. My afternoons and early evenings are then taken up by my clinical work. I love the variety and challenge of my job, and when you see the joy that a baby brings a couple you have helped – it's a very special feeling.

What makes the Harley Street Fertility Clinic so special for patients?

I started the Harley Street Fertility Clinic in order to look after patients the way I would like to be cared for. Most importantly, all our patients are seen by a single doctor throughout their treatment, who will perform all the tests and operations throughout the patient's journey at the clinic. We also provide evening appointments for couples undergoing treatment to make life convenient for them. Above all, we care about our patients beyond providing a clinical service.

What's the most rewarding/satisfying part of your job?

The thrill of a successful pregnancy is indescribable. I feel extremely privileged to be able to help couples face a very difficult and personal issue.