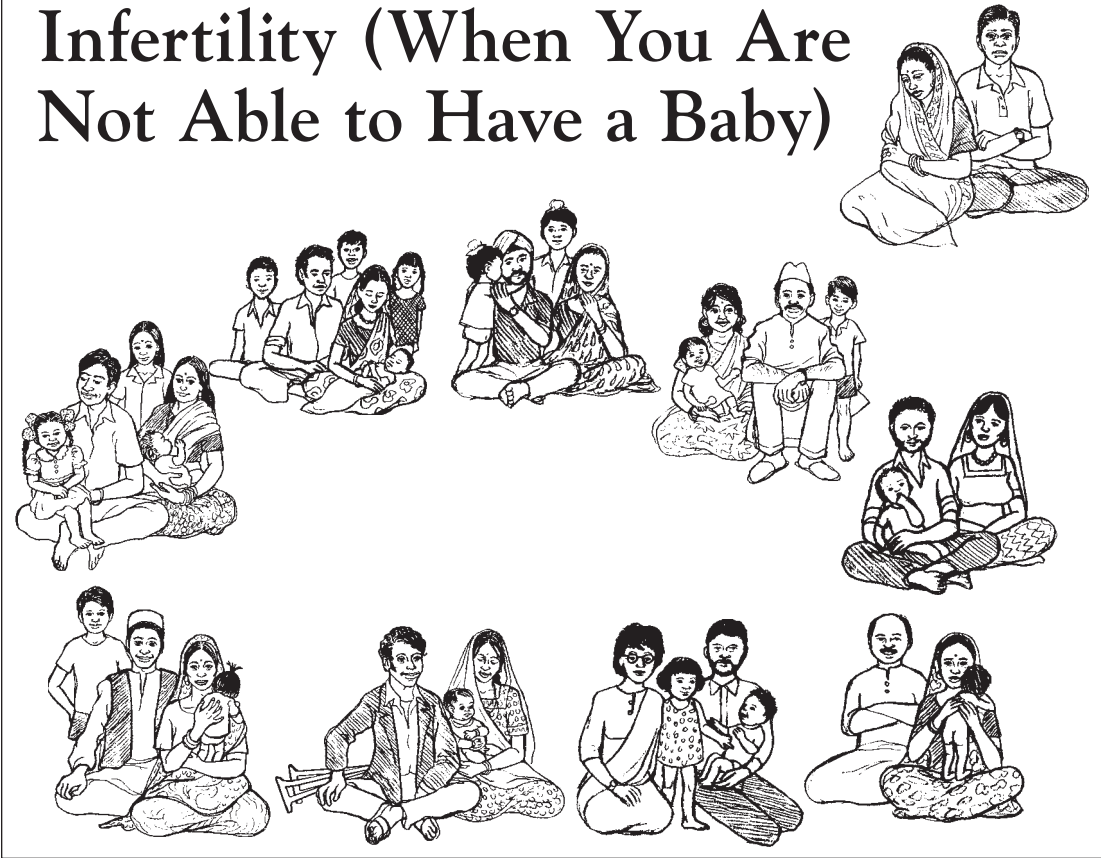


# Chapter 14

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# Infertility (When You Are Not Able to Have a Baby)



**M**ost men and women assume they will be able to have children. The truth is that **about 1 out of every 7 couples has trouble getting pregnant**. Some men and women do not want to have children. But for couples who look forward to having children, infertility can bring sorrow, anger, and disappointment.

Often it is the woman who is blamed if a couple does not have children. But almost half the time, it is the man who is infertile. Sometimes a man will not believe it is his problem, or that it may be a shared problem. He may refuse to go for an *examination*, or he may react with anger. Most often this is because infertility causes shame in communities where a man is expected to produce children as a sign of his manhood.

Infertility has many causes. Some of them can be treated and some cannot. This chapter will help you understand infertility and what you can do about it.

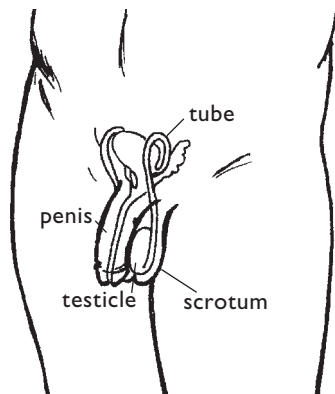
► When a couple cannot have a baby, it may be because the man, the woman, or both have a fertility problem. It is a problem that few people talk about.

## What Is Infertility?

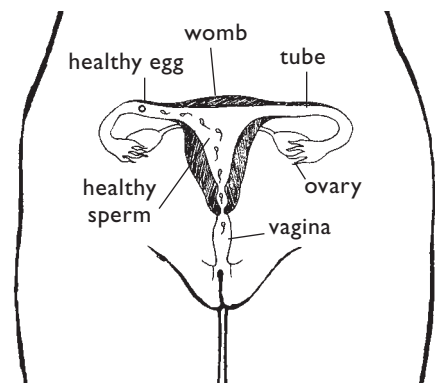
► *Habits such as drinking alcohol, smoking or chewing tobacco, and using drugs can all affect a man's or a woman's fertility.*

We say a couple is infertile if they cannot get pregnant after having sex together a few times a month for a year, without using a family planning method. A couple may also have a fertility problem if they have had 3 or more miscarriages (lost pregnancies) in a row.

A man or woman who has already had a child can also become infertile. A problem can develop in the years since the last child was born. Sometimes the problem is not the man's or the woman's alone but a combination of the two. And sometimes both partners seem to be healthy and no doctor or test can find out what is causing the problem.



*In a man with normal fertility, healthy sperm are produced in the testicles and inserted in the woman's vagina when the man ejaculates during sex.*



*In a woman with normal fertility, sperm swim through the womb and join with a healthy egg.*

## What Causes Infertility?

### INFERTILITY IN A MAN

*The main causes of infertility in a man are:*

1. **He does not produce enough sperm.** Or his *sperm* cannot swim to the woman's tubes or to *fertilize* the eggs.
2. **He had *mumps* after *puberty*** that harmed his *testicles*. He may still come (*ejaculate*), but the semen has no sperm in it.
3. **His sperm cannot leave his penis** because he has scars in his tubes from a *sexually transmitted infection (STI)*.
4. **He has a swelling** of the veins in his *scrotum* (*varicocele*).
5. **Problems during sex because:**
  - his *penis* does not get hard.
  - his penis gets hard but does not stay hard during sex.
  - he comes too quickly, before his penis is deep in the woman's *vagina*.
6. **Illnesses** such as *diabetes*, *tuberculosis*, and *malaria*.

## INFERTILITY IN A WOMAN

The main causes of infertility in a woman are:

1. **She has scarring in her tubes or inside her womb.** Scarring in the *tube* can prevent the egg from moving through the tube, or the sperm from swimming to the egg. Scarring in the *womb* can prevent the fertilized egg from attaching to the wall of the womb. Sometimes a woman gets scarring but does not know it because she does not feel ill. But years later she learns she is infertile.

Scarring can be caused by:

- an infection from an untreated STI that goes up into the womb or tubes (pelvic inflammatory disease or PID).
- unsafe *abortion* or problems in childbirth that caused damage or *infection* in the womb.
- unclean conditions when an IUD is put in that caused an infection.
- problems from an operation of the vagina, womb, tubes, or *ovaries*.

2. **She does not produce an egg** (no ovulation). This can be because the body does not make enough of the needed *hormones* at the right time. If her monthly bleedings are less than 25 days apart, or more than 35 days apart, she may have a problem with ovulation.

Sometimes a woman does not produce eggs if she loses weight very quickly, or if she is too fat.

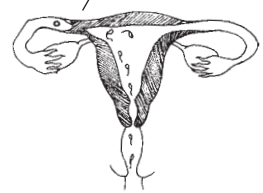
3. **She has growths in her womb** (fibroids). Fibroids can prevent *conception* or make it difficult to carry the pregnancy.

4. **Illnesses** such as HIV, diabetes, tuberculosis, and malaria can also make a woman less fertile.

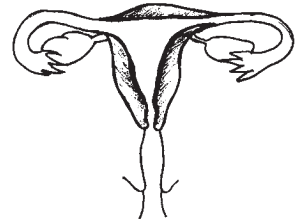
► **Infertility caused by infection can be prevented.** For more information, see page 274 and 279.

### Infertility in the woman

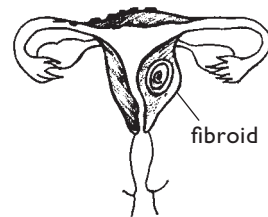
1. blocked tube



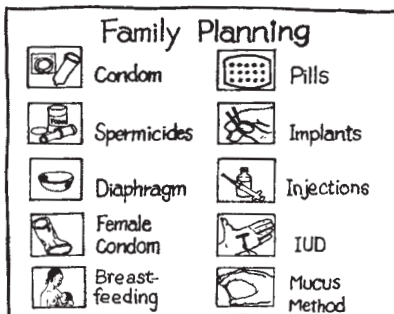
2. ovary does not produce an egg



3. fibroids



## Family Planning Is Safe

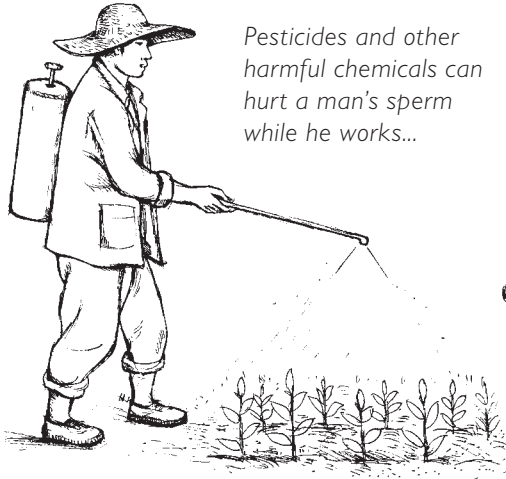


Family planning methods are often blamed for infertility. But family planning methods (other than sterilization) do not cause infertility except in some cases when an IUD has not been put in correctly and causes an infection in the womb or tubes. For more information, see the chapter on "Family Planning," page 197.

## Dangers at Work or Home That Can Hurt Fertility

**T**hese dangers can hurt fertility in many ways—from the making of sperm and eggs to the birth of a healthy baby:

- **Contaminated air, food, or water** caused by dangerous pesticides or toxic chemicals used in factories and farms.



*Pesticides and other harmful chemicals can hurt a man's sperm while he works...*



*...and if the woman washes his clothes, the harmful chemicals are passed to her.*



*Working in hot places, like sitting near the hot engine of a truck for many hours, can kill sperm and cause a man to be infertile.*

- **Smoking or chewing tobacco, or drinking alcohol or coffee.** Women who smoke or chew tobacco, or who drink a lot of alcohol or coffee may take longer to become pregnant or have more miscarriages. Men who smoke or drink a lot of alcohol or coffee make fewer sperm, and these are often damaged or weak.

- **High temperatures.** A man's sperm need to stay cool. That is why the testicles hang in the scrotum outside a man's body. When the testicles get too warm they can stop making healthy sperm. For example, this can happen if a man wears tight clothes that press his testicles up inside his body, or if he takes a hot bath, or works near hot things such as boilers, furnaces, or the hot engine of a long-distance truck—especially if he drives for many hours without a break. Once the testicles become cool, they start making healthy sperm again.

- **Overweight.** For men and especially for women, being obese can make getting pregnant difficult.
- **Medicines.** Some medicines can hurt fertility in men and women, and it is best to avoid medicines while you are trying to become pregnant. If you must use them, tell your health worker you are trying to get pregnant.

**If you or your partner think you have a fertility problem:**

**1. Try to have sex during your fertile time.** Although a man makes millions of sperm every day, a healthy woman releases only one egg a month. This is called her fertile time—the only time during the month when she can get pregnant. For most women their fertile time starts about 10 days after the first day of the *monthly bleeding* and lasts about 6 days.

The body has several signs that tell you when you are in a fertile time. The easiest signs to check are the changes in the *mucus* in your vagina.

**What to Do for Infertility**

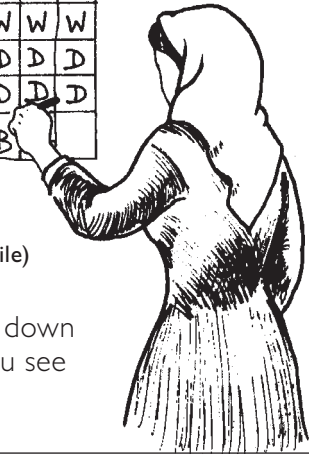
**Checking your mucus**

During your fertile time, your *cervix* makes mucus that helps sperm get into the womb. This mucus looks clear and wet, like raw egg white, and can be stretched between your fingers. Later in your monthly cycle, you may see sticky or dry mucus. This kind of mucus stops the man's sperm from getting into the womb.

See page 220 to learn how to check your mucus. Write down the changes every day on a chart. During the week that you see wet, shiny, clear mucus, try to have sex every day.

	B	B	B	B	B	D
D	D	D	D	W	W	W
W	W	W	D	D	D	D
D	D	D	D	D	D	D
B	B	B	B	B		

**B** = monthly bleeding  
**W** = wet days (fertile)  
**D** = dry days (not fertile)



When you have sex, the best positions for getting the sperm close to the opening of your womb are:

- to lie on your back with the man on top.
- to lie on your side.

Then, after having sex, lie flat on your back for about 20 minutes. This will help the sperm swim into your womb and find the egg.

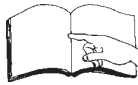
Avoiding these things can also help:

- Do not use oils or creams during sex. They can kill the sperm or stop it from reaching the egg.
- Do not *douche* or wash inside your vagina. Douching before or after sex can change the wetness inside your vagina, making it harder for the sperm to live.
- Your partner should not have a hot bath before having sex. Heat on the testicles kills sperm.

► Try not to worry if you do not get pregnant right away. Many couples get pregnant within a year if they continue to have sex during the woman's fertile days.



STIs



staying healthy, 149  
eating for good  
health, 165

## Losing a Pregnancy (Miscarriage)



infection in the womb

### 2. Treat any health problems.

Both you and your partner should have medical exams and be checked and treated for STIs, and other illnesses. If either of you has an STI, both of you must be treated. Be sure to finish all the medicines you are given.



### 3. Practice good health habits:

- Eat good, healthy food. If you do not have regular monthly bleeding and you are very thin or very fat, try to gain or lose weight.
- Avoid smoking or chewing tobacco, using drugs, or drinking alcohol.
- Avoid *caffeine* in drinks like coffee, black tea, and cola drinks.
- Get plenty of rest and regular exercise.

### 4. Try to see a health worker if you are not pregnant after one year.

There are some simple tests that do not cost much that may be able to tell you what the problem is. For example, the health worker may look at your partner's sperm under a *microscope* to see if they are healthy. She may give you a *pelvic exam* to check your vagina, womb, and tubes for infection or growths. Or she may teach you to tell if your ovaries are releasing an egg by taking your *temperature* every morning.

It is important to remember that these tests only tell you what the problem is—they will not solve it. Even the most expensive medicines and operations often cannot cure infertility.

**F**or many couples, the problem is not getting pregnant but staying pregnant. Losing 1 or even 2 pregnancies is common. It can be the body's way of ending a pregnancy that is too weak to survive.

But if you have lost 3 or more pregnancies, there may be another problem, such as:

- unhealthy eggs or sperm.
- a problem with the shape of the womb.
- growths (fibroids) in the womb.
- the wrong balance of *hormones* in your body.
- infection in the womb or vagina.
- an illness, such as malaria.
- toxic chemicals in your water, your community, or where you work.

**The warning signs of miscarriage are:**

- small amounts of brown, red, or pink blood from your vagina.
- pains or *cramping*, no matter how small.

**What to do when signs start:**

Once a miscarriage starts there is usually not much that can be done to stop it. If you are bleeding slightly, without pain:

- lie down and rest for 2 or 3 days.
- do not have sex.

If bleeding continues or becomes heavy, or if you are more than 4 months pregnant, go to a hospital and tell them you are pregnant.

**IMPORTANT** *If you are in the first 3 months of pregnancy and you have severe pain, feel faint, and have some bleeding, you could have a pregnancy in the tube. Go to a hospital immediately. Be sure to tell them you are pregnant.*

**Before you try to get pregnant again:**

- Follow the guidelines on page 234 about treating health problems and practicing good health habits. It is especially important to avoid caffeine, to stop smoking or chewing tobacco, and to stop drinking alcohol or using drugs. These things can all help cause miscarriage.
- If your miscarriages always happen after you have been pregnant for 3 months, it may be that the opening to your womb is weak. This can sometimes be treated by having a doctor put a small tie around the *cervix* to keep it closed. Make sure that the doctor has experience giving this treatment. When it is time to give birth, the tie has to be removed.

**If you do become pregnant:**

- try not to lift heavy things.
- try not to have sex for the first 6 to 8 weeks of your pregnancy.
- rest when you can.

*Losing a pregnancy is common. If it happens to you, it does not mean you cannot have a healthy pregnancy the next time.*

► *Miscarriage often happens no matter how careful you are. Do not blame yourself.*





## Living with Infertility



helping relationships,  
support groups

Infertility can make a woman or man feel sad, nervous, alone, frustrated, or angry.

When this happens, it is important to know you are not alone. Try to talk with people who love and care about you. You may also be able to find other couples with the same problem and learn to help each other.

The stories below describe some ways that people have coped with infertility:

*I understand how you feel. I also have been unable to have a child.*



### Adopting a child: Lina's story

Lina was 25 years old and had been married 3 times. She was very unhappy because each of her husbands divorced her when she did not become pregnant. In the village, people spoke about her and blamed her, saying that she must have used some magic to avoid pregnancy before she was married, and that it must have been so strong it had made her infertile.

Her sisters all had children, and sometimes Lina cared for them. Her older sister had *tuberculosis (TB)* and she was very ill when she gave birth to twins. Lina asked if she might adopt one of the twins and her sister agreed. Lina went to the health center and asked the health worker to help her find a way to feed the baby. The health worker taught Lina how to feed the baby from a cup and arranged to have the baby breastfed during the day by a healthy woman in the village with another baby. At night Lina fed her baby from a cup, with breast milk that another sister gave her each evening.



Lina's friends and neighbors were not sure that her baby would be healthy. But when they saw the baby grow strong, they were pleased and proud of Lina. In fact, Lina came to be seen as an expert in raising adopted babies. When a village mother died in childbirth, her baby was given to Lina to care for.

The twins have grown up now, and people often say that the one Lina adopted is taller and stronger than the other. They credit this to Lina's loving care.

— Bundoora, Australia

### Building a life without children: Sara and Tito's story

Sara and Tito tried for many years to have children, but they were not able to. At first they were sad, because in their community, couples were expected to have as many children together as they could. But then they decided to stop thinking that their lives were not complete without children and to plan a future for themselves.

They decided to start a business and to travel from town to town, market to market, selling pots and pans and other goods. With children, it would have been very difficult for them to travel in this way.



Now that Sara and Tito are older, people say they look alike in their faces and attitudes. They care for each other, share many laughs and many friends. They are not grandparents like their neighbors, but they have many interesting stories to tell. They are respected by everyone in the community.

— Lima, Peru

#### To help others with infertility problems:

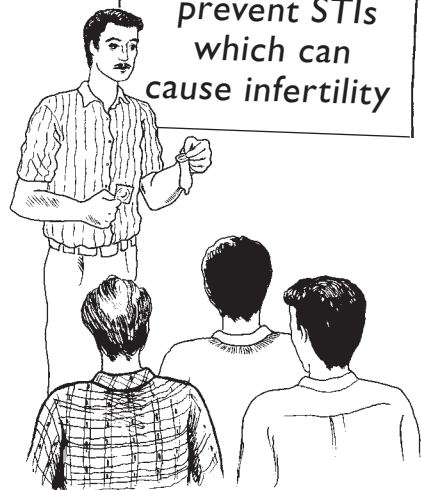
- be kind and sympathetic. It is a difficult time, and they need support and understanding. Do not blame couples who cannot get pregnant.
- teach couples to value and respect each other as companions.
- help a couple who cannot have children to look for other ways to be with children or to make peace with their lives.

#### Health workers can also:

- provide information on ways to adopt children.
- teach young people about STIs and how to prevent them.
- make sure your local health center is prepared to diagnose and treat STIs and to take women's complaints about pelvic pain seriously. Too often women are sent home without treatment after being told there is nothing wrong with them.
- teach women the signs of pelvic infection and the importance of getting immediate and complete treatment.
- teach men and women the signs of STIs, the importance of getting treated right away, and the importance of treating all partners.

### Working for Change

Condoms help prevent STIs which can cause infertility



There are many causes of infertility, but STIs are the easiest to prevent.