

Thinking about using my own sperm or eggs?

Assisted Human Reproduction

The purpose of this brochure is to:

- Provide information about some of the psychological, social and emotional stress common to those undergoing assisted human reproduction (AHR);
- Suggest some ways to cope with this stress;
- Suggest resources that may help you through the AHR process.

Why is there stress?

Loss of control

The feeling of 'loss of control' in planning a family is one of the major stress factors associated with AHR.

Regardless of the reason for using AHR, stress may affect a person physically, mentally and emotionally. For example, some may experience real and potential losses such as: hopes and dreams for the future, privacy, self-esteem and how you define your sense of self, intimacy with your partner, and autonomy over family building goals. You may alternate between feeling hopeful and positive one moment, and despondent and negative the next – which is why the experience of undergoing AHR is often described as an 'emotional roller coaster'.

Social impact

Social stress can be one of the most difficult aspects of AHR to manage. Your issues may not be apparent or well understood by others. You may not want to share your experiences with family or friends. Seldom are the topics of infertility or AHR openly discussed. Comments and questions, no matter how well-intentioned, can at times feel intrusive and insensitive. Because others may not understand or appreciate the challenges that you are going through, you may feel socially isolated and awkward around family and friends.

Treatment stress

Medical treatment relating to AHR may add to the stress as it means relinquishing a very private and personal matter into the hands of health care professionals. In addition, many women experience emotional side-effects when taking hormone-type medications.

Disruption of daily life

Pursuing AHR treatment may become all-consuming and disrupt normal routines, work hours and lifestyle. The financial costs of AHR may be an additional source of

stress since it is often expensive and may not be fully covered under provincial or private health insurance. If you live some distance from the nearest clinic, you may have additional costs associated with travel.

Difficult decision-making

Many of the decisions you may need to make when undergoing AHR are complex and difficult. Some examples include:

- You and your spouse or partner might disagree about what treatments to try, how many times to try, or when to stop treatment;
- In pursuing *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), single embryo transfer is often advised and you may be asked what to do with embryos that remain;
- You may need to consider other means to build your family such as using donated sperm or eggs, surrogacy or adoption.

How can I manage the stress?

There are various ways of dealing with stress. Some may involve identifying and adapting coping skills you already possess, learning new strategies or involving others such as trained counsellors in exploring how best to cope with the stress of undergoing AHR.

On a personal level

Recognizing and paying attention to your own needs is especially important. In addition to the 'emotional roller coaster' of hope and despair, the physical side effects associated with AHR treatment may have a significant impact upon you physically, psychologically and emotionally. It is important that you continue to eat well, get enough rest, and plan to do other activities. Moderate physical exercise can also help relieve stress.

With your spouse or partner

Although AHR treatments affect both women and men, women are more likely to report higher levels of physical and emotional stress. Undergoing AHR can be particularly stressful to a couple's relationship. You and your spouse or partner may not always react the same way or cope with stress in the same way. While it is important to talk and stay connected with one another, it is equally important not to allow the issue to consume your lives. A good strategy is to schedule activities together that allow you to focus on something other than your situation as a necessary diversion from the stress.

In social situations

Given the many reminders of fertility and parenthood that surround us, it can be a challenge to cope with situations such as baby showers, family gatherings, or even the workplace where questions may arise about your plans for having children. How much to disclose is a very personal decision, and will depend upon how open you are with your family, friends or colleagues. Sharing some information can help to reduce social pressures, engage support and sensitize others to comments that might be upsetting or unhelpful. Infertility and experiences with AHR are actually more common than you may think – meaning that disclosure of your situation may inspire support, similar stories and helpful information from where you would not have expected.

Becoming informed

Becoming informed of stress that is often associated with undergoing AHR can help you to regain some sense of control and to make informed decisions. It is important to feel free to ask questions so that you may be an active participant in your care, and if desired to seek out a second opinion from another healthcare provider. For more information there are books, web sites, online forums, support groups and counsellors that specialize in psychosocial issues relating to infertility and AHR.

Seeking counselling

Talking to a professional experienced in psychosocial issues relating to AHR such as a psychologist or a social worker can be extremely beneficial. These professionals can help you to explore different coping strategies, consider the implications of various family-building options, access information and support, and manage the stress associated with AHR. Your treatment centre may have a counsellor on staff or be able to refer you to a resource in your community. Patient organizations may also be a source of information about counselling resources. Support groups and networks can help to reduce your sense of isolation as they allow you to meet and share concerns with others who have experiences similar to your own. Such groups may be professionally or peer-led. You may also find some internet websites that offer support, although it is wise to research online resources carefully.

Resources

Assisted Human Reproduction Canada (AHRC)

www.ahrc-pac.gc.ca

Phone (toll free): 1-866-467-1853

Email: info@ahrc-pac.gc.ca

Counselling and Assisted Human Reproduction: A Guide for Patients

www.ahrc-pac.gc.ca/v2/pubs/counselling-counseling-eng.php

Thinking About Donating Sperm or Eggs to a Third Party?

www.ahrc-pac.gc.ca/v2/pubs/index-eng.php

Thinking About Using Sperm or Eggs from a Third Party Donor?

www.ahrc-pac.gc.ca/v2/pubs/index-eng.php

Infertility Awareness Association of Canada

www.iaac.ca

Phone: 514-484-2891

Email: info@iaac.ca

Infertility Network (Canada)

www.infertilitynetwork.org

Phone: 416-691-3611

Email: info@InfertilityNetwork.org

LGBTQ Parenting Network Canada

www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca

Phone: 416-324-4100 ext. 5219

Email: parentingnetwork@sherbourne.on.ca

Health On the Net Foundation, Looking for reliable health information?

www.hon.ch/HONcode/Patients/visitor_safeUse2.html