



QUALITIES OF LIFE: HEALTH

The baby-making market

Beware when shopping for egg, sperm donors

By Leslie Mann | Special to the Tribune

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Thanks to his low sperm count, Chicago resident Jason and wife Megan (not their real names) were unable to conceive. They considered adoption, but Megan wanted to carry their child. So they used donor sperm.

The result: a bouncing baby boy, born in early October. So pleased are the couple, they purchased additional vials of the donor's sperm for future pregnancies.

Megan and Jason are among a growing number of people who are choosing donor sperm or eggs to conceive, doctors say, though exact numbers are hard to come by. The number of donated eggs transferred to patients rises yearly, up to the most recent 13,327 in 2005, according to the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology (SART). No group tracks sperm-donation numbers, but those in the industry say, anecdotally, that they also rise yearly.

Before people consider this route to conception, though, doctors recommend these steps:

* Learn the lingo. If you don't know ART (assisted reproductive technology) from IVF (in-vitro fertilization), learn the industry's acronym-laden language. Fertility Centers of Illinois (fcionline.com, 877-324-4483) publishes a handy glossary.

* Count your pennies. One reason Illinoisans have more than their share of donor births is because our state law requires insurance policies that cover more than 25 people to cover infertility treatment. If you have your own health insurance, though, you may have to foot the bill yourself. That can cost \$10,000 to \$25,000.

* Make sure this is right for you. "This is a forever decision. You are not bringing home a puppy," said Pam Madsen, director of the American Fertility Association. "Be sure that you want to do this, as opposed to surrogacy or adoption. If you aren't sure, you aren't ready."

Contrary to myth, Madsen added, choosing half of your child's genes through an egg agency or sperm bank doesn't guarantee a perfect baby.

* Determine whether you want your donor to be open or anonymous. And decide if you plan to tell your child of his origins.

"We chose a donor through an open program because it gave us lots of information about him," explained Megan, whose clinic was Advanced Reproductive Health Centers in Orland Park. "In addition to seeing pictures of him and reading his biography, we have his and his family's full medical history."

As part of the openness trend, Megan said, they "will give the child the choice of learning about the donor if he wants to when he's older." With mutual consent, this can lead to a meeting.

Alyssa (not her real name) of Chicago, on the other hand, knows the basics about the egg donor -- a medical student, 25, healthy -- who gave her twins but chose an anonymous agreement. She does not know the donor's name or whereabouts and does not plan to tell her twins that they were conceived with donor eggs.

In his book "Genius Factory," David Plotz traces the history of the industry, the trend toward openness and adverse effects of secrecy.

"At first, no one told," Plotz said. "But the kids found out and resented their parents. So increasingly, couples now tell, in part because they know it is healthier and in part because there is less stigma. Also, there are more lesbians and single women using donors, and they have no fathers to protect."

Donor recipients can learn from the adoption community, said Marie Davidson, staff psychologist at Fertility Centers of Illinois.

"There is a plethora of information from adoption studies that supports disclosure," Davidson said. "Some plan to keep it a secret, but there's always a friend or relative who slips. There are great children's books and other resources to help parents tell their children, starting at an early age, so they don't drop a bombshell later."

* Research the donor sources and their claims. Sperm banks have been around longer than egg-donor agencies, so they are easier to investigate. The banks tell you, through their Web sites and brochures, everything from the donors' physical characteristics to their medical histories. A catalog from California Cryobank, for example, says donor No. 5741 is a psychologist with brown hair, blue eyes and O-positive blood. He is 6 feet 1, 210 pounds, of Irish/German heritage, and his sperm scored at least one pregnancy so far.

An egg-donor agency, on the other hand, doesn't keep frozen inventories and catalogs. Rather, it matches you with the egg donor. Then the donor proceeds with the medical steps necessary to harvest her eggs.

Donor sources are not licensed in Illinois, so to check their credentials, make sure the egg-donor agency follows the ASRM (American Society for Reproductive Medicine) guidelines or the sperm bank is accredited by the American Association of Tissue Banks.

Both sperm and egg donor sources' claims, though, are tough to verify. In fact, organizations such as the Donor Sibling Registry refute many of their claims in their chat rooms.

"Even if the donor source is reputable, the information it gives you is a snapshot in time of the donor, who may be 18," warned Wendy Kramer, co-founder of the registry. "You don't know that he may have cancer at age 25 or a heart attack at age 30."

* Interview doctors. Donor conception is fraught with emotional and psychological issues, so find a reproductive endocrinologist who has empathy and a string of credentials.

Ask how long the doctor she has been doing this. What are her success rates? Will she recommend donor sources, or should you do your own search? Does your opinion jibe with her and her opinion about openness/secrecy? Does her staff include a psychologist (a trend), or does she outsource this service?

* Find a lawyer. Call the area bar association for a lawyer who specializes in reproductive law. For a known donor, the lawyer will draft a contract between you, your spouse, the donor, the donor's spouse and the fertility clinic. If you work with a donor bank or agency, you will sign a contract with it.

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Resources for parents

For more information about egg or sperm donors or other infertility issues, contact:

Resolve, resolve.org, 703-556-7172

International Council on Infertility Information Dissemination, inciid.org, 703-379-9178

American Fertility Association, theAFA.org, 888-917-3777

Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, sart.org, 205-978-5000

American Society for Reproductive Medicine, asrm.org, 205-978-5000

Donor Sibling Registry, donorsiblingregistry.com

Donor Conception Network, dcnetwork.org, 011-44-0208-245-4369

Egg-donor agencies include:

ConceiveAbilities, <http://www.conceiveabilities.com>, 773-868-3971

The Center for Egg Options, eggoption.com, 310-726-9600

Alternative Reproductive Resources, arr1.com, 773-327-7315

Center for Egg Options, egg411.com, 847-656-8733

Sperm banks include:

California Cryobank, cryobank.com, 800-977-3761

Fairfax Cryobank, fairfaxcryobank.com, 800-338-8407

Xytex Corp., xytex.com, 706-733-0130