

## HEALTH ::

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### **In vitro fertilization: Egg donor gives 'ultimate gift'**

**Chicago woman finds donating her eggs not only helps others, but it pays well, too**

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**BY JIM RITTER**

After watching friends go through the agony of infertility, the young woman decided she would try to help other couples have babies.

So she became an egg donor.



The 28-year-old woman, named Heather, was surprised to learn that donating eggs isn't just an altruistic act. Donors also receive substantial fees. The going

Heather, who asked that her last name not be used, has earned \$14,000 for donating eggs to two couples. The payments allowed her to pay bills and increase her savings. But while the money is welcome, Heather said she did it mainly to help.

"It's the ultimate gift," she said.

The use of donated eggs is becoming increasingly popular. The number of in vitro fertilization attempts that involved either donated eggs or donated embryos increased from about 5,000 attempts in 1995 to more than 16,000 attempts in 2005, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The major reason a woman's fertility plummets after age 35 is the diminishing quality of her eggs. Using donated eggs from younger women can greatly increase the odds an older woman can still have a baby.

About 12 percent of in vitro fertilization attempts in 2005 involved donated eggs.

"It's a more popular approach than it used to be," said Dr. Angie Beltsos of Fertility Centers of Illinois.

#### **Paid by insurance**

Heather is an unmarried fitness trainer who lives in the south suburbs. Internet research led her to Chicago-based Alternative Reproductive Resources. ARR recruits donors and supplies couples with eggs. ARR charges about \$12,000, with \$7,000 going to the donor.

By comparison, donors generally receive up to \$10,000 on the East and West coasts, but only \$3,000 to \$5,000 in the South, said ARR president Robin von Halle.

The in vitro fertilization procedure costs an additional \$10,000 to \$15,000. IVF is especially popular in Illinois because a state law requires many insurance plans to pay for it.

Through attorneys, Heather has signed contracts with the couples, whom she hasn't met. Each couple agreed to pay the \$7,000 fee and never seek child support from Heather.

Heather, in turn, gave up all rights to any child born from her eggs. She will not know the identity of any such child, and vice versa.

Heather underwent a battery of physical, psychological and genetic tests. She gave an extensive family medical history and provided pictures of herself from infancy to the present.

She used birth control pills to synchronize her cycle with the prospective mother's. To increase her egg production, she injected herself with fertility drugs two or three times a day for a week.

A doctor used a needle to remove eggs from Heather's ovaries. The eggs were fertilized in a dish with the prospective father's sperm, and one or more of the resulting embryos were implanted in the mother.

### **A risk: Torn ovaries**

Donating eggs is far more difficult and risky than donating sperm. Egg donors face such risks as bloating, shortness of breath, blood clots and torn ovaries.

Heather said she experienced sharp mood swings and temporarily gained 20 pounds.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine said paying egg donors is an ethical way to "acknowledge the time, inconvenience and discomfort." Also, allowing payments increases the supply of eggs, enabling more infertile couples to have babies.

But the society's ethics committee also acknowledged there's a risk such payments could devalue human life by treating eggs as mere property.

The higher the price, the more incentive a donor has to disregard risks to herself and to conceal negative information, the ethics committee said. And if the price gets too high, only rich couples would be able to afford donor eggs.

The committee said payments greater than \$5,000 "require justification," and amounts over \$10,000 "are not appropriate."

Heather donated 10 eggs to one couple last July and nine or 10 eggs to a second couple last November.

If all went well, both couples would now be expecting children.

"If I can give that gift to have a family, it would make me feel wonderful," Heather said.

Heather is uncertain whether she will ever want to have a child of her own.

"There are a million reasons to say yes," she said, "and a million reasons to not have a child."

## Be an egg donor

You've seen the ads for egg donation clinics on the train and around town. But what exactly does the process entail? Check out these Web sites to learn everything there is to know about egg donation.



### **The American Surrogacy Center**

<http://www.surrogacy.com>

Despite the site's name, TASC is chock full of information for donors. Potential donors can browse through and post ads, find support groups and online support forums, read current news articles and find local professionals specializing in reproductive services.

### **The Center for Egg Options**

<http://www.egg411.com>

**Northbrook's Center for Egg Options offers egg donation and surrogacy services and the site provides information about both. The explanation of the process is simple to understand and there are testimonials and a frequently asked questions area. If you feel this might be your facility of choice, you can also download an application.**

### **University of Chicago -- Obstetrics and Gynecology**

<http://www.chicagofertility.org>

Here, on the site for the University of Chicago Hospitals, you'll find a trove of information about infertility and assisted reproduction. The content is aimed at the intended recipient, but it can give potential donors a peek into what happens after they have donated their eggs and why egg donation is necessary.

### **University of Illinois Medical Center**

<http://uillinoismedcenter.org>

Tapping the world of academia is always a good option when trying to gain as much information as possible. The University of Illinois Medical Center site has a small amount of information on it for donors. It also offers brief explanations of other types of fertility concerns with a slightly more medical tone than some of the other sites, as well as a brochure that can be downloaded with an introduction to the doctors.

### **Advanced Fertility Center of Chicago**

<http://www.eggdonors.net>

AFC of Chicago has clinics in Gurnee and Crystal Lake, and to be a donor you must live relatively close to either location. While it may not be the flashiest, Eggdonors.net is one of the more comprehensive sites in providing information for potential donors. On these pages you'll find graphs, charts and statistics all related to egg donation.

### **Egg Donor Information Project**

<http://www.stanford.edu>

This site was created by Stanford University to help women learn the risks and benefits of egg donation. It takes the donor through the entire donation process including screening, medications, recipients and gives the donor a list of things to consider. You can also find a list of other resources should you have more questions.

### **New York Department of Health**

<http://www.health.state.ny.us>

Easily one of the most comprehensive resources on the Web, the site is teeming with information on becoming an egg donor. It explains how to read donor ads, how it will affect your life, what happens with your eggs and the legal ramifications of the process. There is also a checklist of questions to ask and a glossary of terms.

### **Egg Donation Inc.**

<http://www.eggdonor.com>

The site walks a potential donor through all 28 days of her cycle, noting what is happening to her body at each stage. It also has an example couple profile so that the donor might see what a recipient might look like. Legal information, compensation and medical information are also briefly covered.

### **American Society for Reproductive Medicine**

<http://www.asrm.org>

There's plenty of information on this site, though you might need to be a doctor or pre-med to understand it. But for

those looking for a more scientific view of the process, there are journal articles galore. You'll find information on laws, ethics and the procedure itself.

**American Pregnancy Association**

<http://www.americanpregnancy.org>

The APA's Web site is a clear and concise definition of the concerns surrounding donor eggs. It describes who uses the eggs, what the process is like and what the risks are, all in an easily-understandable manner. There is also tons of information on what causes difficulty getting pregnant as well as what makes for a healthy pregnancy.

**The Center for Human Reproduction**

<http://www.centerforhumanreprod.com>

The Center for Human Reproduction has offices on Chicago's North Side (Halsted and Diversey) and Oakbrook Terrace. In the site's donor section you'll find most of the information you'll need to become a donor. Aside from an application, there is a detailed list of considerations about becoming a donor, including the physical, mental and emotional aspects of the procedure. The list very clearly states what is expected of a donor.