

the frozen eggs, and even then, I knew there would be a risk my eggs might not survive the thaw or I could miscarry.

Self preservation

Egg freezing – or oocyte cryopreservation – is available on the NHS to cancer patients about to undergo potentially sterilising treatment or women with other medical conditions that might leave them infertile. But ‘social freezing’, done privately, is on the rise, thanks to a new technology called vitrification.

Eggs contain mostly water, so the previous slow-freezing method often formed ice crystals, damaging the eggs or causing them to burst completely. Vitrification takes eggs down to -196°C in less than one minute, significantly improving their chances of survival. Nonetheless, the statistics still aren't great. There have been fewer than 20 live births from frozen eggs in Britain since 2000 and the average live birth rate per cycle is around 12 per cent*, although this doesn't take into account whether they're slow-frozen or flash-frozen, or the women's ages.

Advocates of elective egg freezing believe it can save a lot of heartache, particularly since recent studies suggest 30 per cent of all graduate women in the UK will end up childless by menopause**, some by choice but many by circumstance. “In an overwhelming number of cases, this will be because they've left it too late or haven't met Mr Right until much later on in life,” says Dr Gillian Lockwood, medical director of Midland Fertility Services, where some 40 per cent of patients freeze their eggs for social reasons. “Social egg freezing is for those who want to buy themselves a little more biological time.”

Time to chill?

This would be my logic – my eggs would be banked in case I met someone. However, age is key. Eggs frozen at the age of 25 work well when thawed, but since a woman's eggs age as she does and cell quality declines with age, eggs taken from older women are less likely to survive the freeze-thaw process or turn into successful pregnancies.

I ask Dr Lockwood whether I've left it too late to try. “Freezing 42-year-old eggs would be a very, very long shot,” she tells me and many clinics have a recommended cut-off

age of 38. But it is still possible and a number of experts in fertility suggest I should check my ovarian reserve, or fertility potential, with blood tests and a scan.

If the results of these were good, they would happily offer me egg-freezing treatment, despite my age. That would involve undergoing the first half of an in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) cycle, injecting myself with hormone drugs for ten days to stimulate my ovaries to produce eggs. Those eggs would then be harvested and stored by a clinic, until I was ready to have them thawed and fertilised.

When I ask Professor Robert Winston, professor of science and society and emeritus professor of fertility studies at Imperial College London, whether a woman of my age should try it, his answer is blunt: “Don't! And even if you were 32, I'd say don't do it. I think it's a confidence trick.” He cites a recent study (“and there are very few”) that showed a far lower success rate of just 5.9 per cent†. “You have to ask yourself: is it really the right way to be dealing with the problem of professional women who want to delay childbearing? I don't think it is.”

In a way, his response was music to my ears. I didn't really want to subject my body to the process, but part of me hated the thought of not trying, so the idea that it might be too good to be true means I could let myself off the hook.

Cold comforts

While there are no indications that undergoing the procedure affects a woman's future fertility, it is not without its risks. As with IVF treatment, these include ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS), a complication that can produce blood clotting – although Dr Lockwood says the latest techniques have pretty much abolished this problem.

But Professor Winston is not reassured. “I don't think enough research has been done, and what *has* been done worries me. I'd be concerned about long-term effects.”

Sally Walsh, a single, 40-year-old human resources consultant, needed two cycles when she froze her eggs at 38, following the break-up of a relationship. “I think my thought process was that when I find my next big love, what if he really wants kids?” she says. “Would having my eggs on ice make me more attractive to a guy in his early forties?” She found the injections painful and gruelling and responded poorly to the drugs, getting just three viable eggs the first time and six the second, despite having had a positive ovarian-reserve test.

Opinions differ on the ideal number of eggs to bank, but for a forty-something woman, experts suggest 15-20 would ►

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