



Infertility can lead to isolation and impact on couple's relationships

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Struggling to get pregnant can be a serious blow to the self-esteem of both women and men, according to a new national survey. Seven in 10 (71 percent) women said that infertility makes them feel flawed, while half of men (50 percent) say it makes them feel inadequate. Infertility also has a big impact on a couple's relationship, with half (53 percent) saying they find themselves trying to hide their feelings from their partner. The survey of 585 women and men was conducted in September 2009 by GfK Roper on behalf of Schering-Plough; Schering-Plough and Merck & Co., Inc. (NYSE: MRK) merged on Nov. 3, 2009.

"Couples undergoing fertility treatment clearly experience a rollercoaster of emotions," said Alice D. Domar, Ph.D., executive director, The Domar Center for Mind/Body Health, Boston IVF. "The desire to start a family is a strong one, and failing to achieve that can impact everything from the marital relationship to interactions with future grandparents and friends who become pregnant."

In a signal that the stress of infertility can lead to isolation, about 6 in 10 couples (61 percent) stated they try to hide their fertility troubles from family and friends. One-third (34 percent) say their ability to confide in others has decreased since they began trying to get pregnant. In fact, 54 percent of all couples agreed that it was easier just to tell people that they were not planning to have children, rather than admit to their struggle.

Disbelief a common issue

The majority of those surveyed never imagined that they would experience infertility. Two-thirds (65 percent) said that prior to trying to conceive, it never occurred to them that they may have trouble getting pregnant when they wanted to. More than half of couples (51 percent) agree that they may have waited too long to try to become pregnant. Of the survey respondents currently being treated by a fertility specialist or reproductive endocrinologist, 91 percent wish they had started doing so sooner.

While the survey found that both women and men understand the link between a woman's age and fertility, they often do not fully understand how soon a woman's fertility begins to decline significantly. According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, a healthy 30-year-old woman has about a 20 percent chance per month of getting pregnant, but by age 40, her chance is only about 5 percent per month.(1)

"Although an estimated one in eight couples of childbearing age struggles with fertility problems, patients often say they never thought it would happen to them," said Zev Rosenwaks, M.D., director, Center for Reproductive Medicine, NY-Weill Cornell Medical Center. "Couples need information so they can understand their fertility risk factors, and they need to seek treatment from a specialist quickly if they suspect a problem."

Relationships with family, friends become strained

Infertility can also have a negative impact on a couple's relationships with family and friends. More than 6 in 10 couples (63 percent) say they get tired of people asking them how the process is going, or offering suggestions on how to conceive.

"Couples undergoing fertility treatment often turn inward and stop confiding in family and friends because of the pain involved in talking about their struggle to conceive," said Barbara Collura, executive director, RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association. "It's important for couples to know that extensive resources exist to support them throughout the process."

Many couples also expressed frustration about receiving unsolicited advice. Most often, couples who receive unsolicited advice are told to just relax and stop worrying so much (78 percent), followed by health advice like changing their diet (42 percent), getting more exercise (41 percent) and getting more sleep (38 percent).

"Deciding how much information to share with family and friends and when to share it is a challenge for couples dealing with infertility," said Ken Mosesian, executive director, the American Fertility Association. "Many couples respond by closing themselves off, so it is important for families and friends to be sensitive and listen instead of offering advice."

Intimacy and relationship affected by infertility

More couples agreed that their difficulty getting pregnant has brought them closer together (58 percent), as compared with those who say that it has hurt their relationship (36 percent). Women praise their partners for being supportive, with more than 8 in 10 (84 percent) saying that their partner either makes or attends medical appointments. For those women who have used injectible fertility treatments, 86 percent say that their partner has helped them with injections.

However, both sexes indicate that the stress and tension in their relationship has increased since they first started trying to get pregnant (42 percent of men, 36 percent of women). Men were also more likely than women to say the time spent arguing with their partner has increased (36 percent of men, 26 percent of women).

The struggle to conceive also takes a toll on intimacy. More than half of all couples (55 percent) report that infertility has made sex a physically and emotionally anxious time. In addition, 53 percent of couples say infertility has taken the fun and spontaneity out of their sex life, and more than 4 in 10 (43 percent) report feeling sexually unattractive.