

# Coping with Infertility

by Heidi Smith Luedtke

If your baby-making dreams have become a nightmare, you aren't alone. According to the Centers for Disease Control, infertility affects 7.3 million American women. In many instances, even couples who already have children struggle to get (and stay) pregnant. Age, smoking, stress and obesity may increase your risk.

## Causes of Infertility

There are many reasons for infertility, and it isn't only a woman's issue. The American Society of Reproductive Medicine attributes one-third of cases to male factors, including sperm count or quality; one-third to female factors, including ovulation disorders and endometriosis; and one-third to either a combination of factors or to unknown causes.

Melissa Ford, author of *Navigating the Land of If: Understanding Infertility and Exploring Your Options*, likens infertility to the Bermuda Triangle. "The physical, emotional and financial stressors of infertility are intense and it's easy to get lost," Ford says. "Most couples take one step at a time, venturing deeper into the unknown as they go. Each couple has to find their own way out."

## Pathways Out of Infertility

Infertility might be simpler if there were only one way out. But, there are many options, Ford says, and it's helpful to explore them with your physician as your journey unfolds. Many couples start with the least invasive options—fertility medications and intra-uterine insemination—before moving to

more invasive (and more costly) procedures like in vitro fertilization.

Depending upon the causes of infertility, the use of donor eggs, sperm or embryos or a surrogate may be warranted. Some couples opt for adoption from the beginning, and others choose adoption after other treatments fail. If you're considering donors, surrogacy or adoption, consult a reproductive attorney for advice.

"Some infertile couples choose to live childfree," says Constance Shapiro, PhD, therapist and author of *When You're Not Expecting: An Infertility Survival Guide*. "They move past the grief they feel and commit to a life that doesn't include kids. The emotional journey from feeling childless to being childfree opens the door to other possibilities, but it isn't easy."

## Stresses of Infertility

"Not long after 'I Do' people start asking, 'When are you

"These phrases may sound sympathetic, but they're likely to do more harm than good," says licensed clinical psychologist Robin Goodman, PhD. If you know someone who is struggling with infertility, don't say:

"I know how you feel."

(Everyone is different. Even if you did go through something similar, find out how they feel.)

"It's for the best."

(This is not comforting even if you think it is true. Your friend is grieving for the future she imagined for her family.)

"At least you have each other."

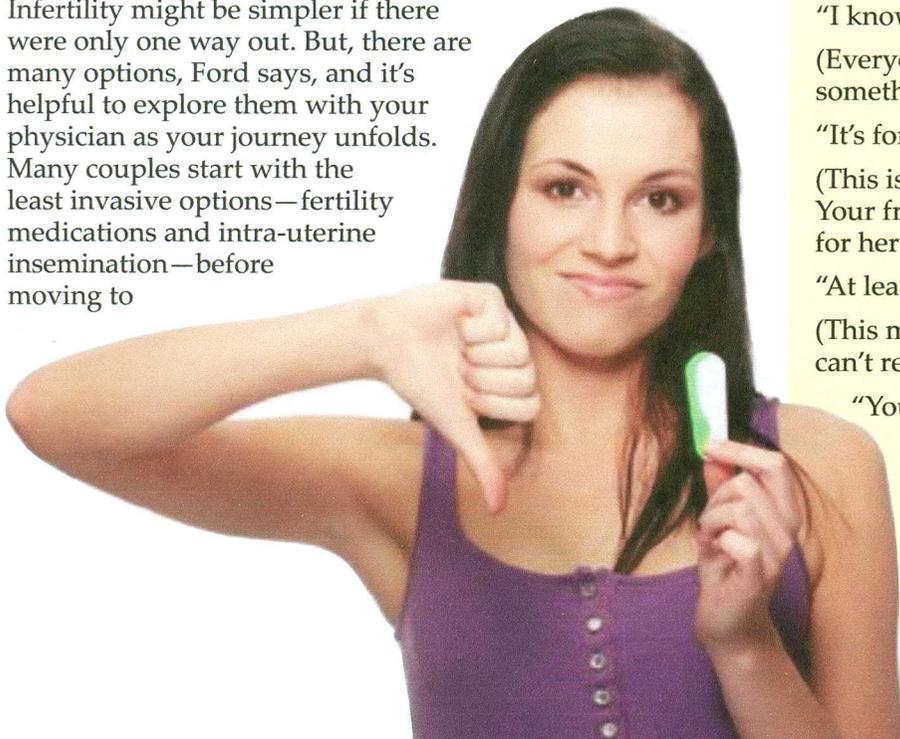
(This may be true. But a partner—or a pet or a job—can't replace a child.)

"You can always adopt."

(Some couples desperately want to have their own biological children.)

"The baby would probably not have survived."

(Even in cases of early miscarriage, your friend may feel overwhelming loss. Don't minimize it.)



going to start a family?' Our society reinforces the idea that a family consists of two parents and their children and people internalize that model," Shapiro says. "When infertility threatens that ideal, it hurts."

Treatment is stressful, too. Doctor's appointments are inconvenient, and fertility drugs can cause mood swings and weight gain. "Treatments are expensive, and many couples take out loans to finance baby-making," Ford says. "Feedback throughout the process—about hormone levels, follicle development and (you hope) pregnancy—is a double-edged sword. Each bit of bad news crushes you a little more.

Seeing others have babies can magnify the disappointment couples feel. When friends show off their sonograms and ask for baby-naming advice, you may feel angry and jealous. Infertility can be isolating, especially if it's a secret.

"To top it off, when you're struggling to get pregnant, sex isn't so sexy," Shapiro says. "Treatments may require intercourse at specific times in the menstrual cycle and forbid it at other times. Couples may miss the intimate physical connection they once experienced."

### How to Cope

"Acknowledge your sadness. Share your feelings with each other, but don't be consumed by negativity," Shapiro cautions. "Put limits on when and where you will discuss emotions....And don't do it in the bedroom!"

Ration your energy. "If baby showers and kid-focused conversations are weighing you down, it's okay to opt out sometimes," Ford says. Friends and family will understand. Participate in social events how and only when you can.

Be united. "For most couples, infertility is too heavy an emotional load to shoulder between just the two of them," says Shapiro. "Working through who to tell and how

much to share can increase your emotional intimacy." Treat infertility as a couple's issue and stay connected.

Seek support. "Don't let infertility tear you down. Join an online community or get counseling. Many clinics have psychologists on staff and most use sliding fee scales," Shapiro says. "Reach past the isolation and get help."

There is no easy way out of infertility. It's normal to feel an enormous loss when your dreams for the future don't come true. "Before infertility, I had never encountered a 'no' from the universe," says Ford. "All the big life events came easy. Infertility made me realize how much is out of my control." Now a mother of twins, Ford says she's learning that lesson over and over in parenting.

*Heidi Smith Luedtke is a freelance writer who conquered secondary infertility through IVF. Follow her blog on parenting as leadership at [www.leadingmama.com](http://www.leadingmama.com).*

Learn about infertility and chart your course with these resources:

- Read *Navigating the Land of If: Understanding Infertility and Exploring Your Options* (2009; Seal Press) by Melissa Ford
- Find infertility coping tips and tools at [www.connieshapiro.com](http://www.connieshapiro.com).
- Reach out to others for support [www.cyclesista.com](http://www.cyclesista.com) and [www.stirrup-queens.com](http://www.stirrup-queens.com).
- Read up on budgeting for infertility treatment, and get referrals to treatment providers, counselors, support groups and reproductive attorneys at [www.Resolve.org](http://www.Resolve.org).
- Learn about topics from artificial insemination to vasectomy at [www.asrm.org](http://www.asrm.org).

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