ADVICE

Male infertility: causes, signs and tests

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What causes infertility in men, whether it has any signs, which tests to have and how it is treated — from lifestyle changes to ICSI.

When a couple cannot conceive, often only the woman goes for tests. Yet a male factor is present in about half of such couples, and sometimes it is the only cause. Checking the man is simple: the main test, a semen analysis, takes one visit and involves no procedures.

Does male infertility have signs

Most often it does not. The man feels healthy, erection and ejaculation are normal, and the problem shows only in the semen analysis. There are, however, signs that are worth seeing a doctor about sooner:

- difficulty with erection or ejaculation, low libido
- pain, swelling or a lump in the scrotum, enlarged veins above a testicle
- small testicles or testicles of different sizes
- mumps affecting the testicles, injuries or operations in the groin
- an undescended testicle in childhood, chemotherapy or radiotherapy

The main causes of infertility in men

Problems with sperm production

One of the commonest causes is a varicocele, enlarged veins of the testicle that make it overheat. Hormonal disorders (low testosterone, raised prolactin), genetic causes such as Klinefelter syndrome and Y-chromosome microdeletions, and the after-effects of orchitis or an undescended testicle belong here too.

Obstacles on the sperm's way

Sperm are produced but do not reach the ejaculate: the ducts are blocked after inflammation or surgery, or underdeveloped from birth. The semen analysis then shows no sperm even though the testicles work.

Infections and inflammation

Sexually transmitted infections and chronic prostatitis can reduce sperm motility and damage the ducts.

Lifestyle and medicines

Smoking, alcohol, obesity and frequent overheating lower sperm quality. Testosterone and anabolic steroids deserve a separate mention: taken without a prescription, they suppress sperm production, sometimes to none at all.

Sometimes no cause is found even after a full work-up. That does not make the situation hopeless: modern methods help then too.

How a man is examined

1. Semen analysis — the number, motility and shape of sperm. If the result is abnormal, the test is repeated.
2. Further semen tests — the MAR test for antisperm antibodies, sperm DNA fragmentation.
3. Hormones — FSH, LH, testosterone, prolactin.
4. Scrotal ultrasound — to see a varicocele and assess the testicles.
5. Genetic testing — when sperm are very few or absent.

How to read a semen analysis report is explained in a separate article, and the test can be done at the clinic — semen analysis: prices and preparation. An andrologist will explain the results.

How male infertility is treated

Treatment depends on the cause:

- lifestyle — stopping smoking, correcting weight, stopping steroids
- treating infections and hormonal disorders
- varicocele surgery — how it is done and what it costs
- assisted reproduction — insemination, IVF or ICSI, when a few sperm are enough for fertilisation
- retrieving sperm from the testicle — when there are none in the ejaculate but they are being produced

When to see a doctor

If there is no pregnancy after a year of regular trying — or after six months when the woman is over 35 — both partners should be tested at the same time. With the signs listed above, an andrologist can be seen without waiting. On the causes of infertility in women, read our article on the causes of infertility in a couple, and you can book an appointment online.

This article is for information only and does not replace a consultation with a doctor. The scope of tests and treatment is set by an andrologist or fertility specialist.