

Freezing Your Eggs (Oocyte Cryopreservation)

Starting a family may be the furthest thing from your mind right now. But, some cancer treatments can cause problems with fertility, making it harder or impossible to have a baby later in life. “Fertility” means the ability to get pregnant. This requires a healthy reproductive system.

How does cancer treatment affect my fertility?

You are born with a set amount of eggs stored in your two ovaries. Your body does not make new eggs over time. The number of eggs you have in your ovaries at a particular time is called your “ovarian reserve.”

Chemotherapy and radiation treatments attack fast growing cells like cancer cells, and in the process can destroy healthy cells like your eggs at the same time, reducing your ovarian reserve. This can cause a condition called primary ovarian failure, a loss of normal ovarian function at a young age, resulting in irregular or no periods, infertility, and menopause (stopping of ovulation).

How cancer treatment can affect your fertility depends on:

- Your age at the time of treatment
 - The type of cancer you have
 - The kind of chemotherapy drugs that you take
 - Where on your body you get radiation
 - How much chemotherapy or radiation you get
 - How long it has been since treatment when you try to have a baby
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What is cryopreservation?

The prefix “cryo” means cold. “Oocytes” are your eggs. Oocyte cryopreservation is preserving, or keeping your eggs stored under very cold temperatures, until you are ready to become a parent. Freezing the eggs from your ovaries is something you can do to try to preserve your fertility now. These eggs are saved in case you need them to try to have a baby later in life when you are past cancer.

Many young women prefer this method of fertility preservation because it does not require the sperm of a partner or donor sperm. There are many things to think about before you choose oocyte cryopreservation.

Am I eligible for cryopreservation?

For some, delaying the start of your cancer treatment to collect and freeze your eggs is not safe. Talk to your healthcare provider about whether or not it would be safe for you to preserve your eggs before starting your cancer treatment.

If you are unable to or choose not to preserve your eggs before treatment, you still may be able to be a parent later in life. Oocyte cryopreservation may be an option for you after you finish your treatment; and, there are many other ways of having a family.

To Learn More

- Cancer and Blood Disorders
206-987-2106
- Ask your child’s healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



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When should cryopreservation be done?

If your healthcare provider agrees it is safe and you want to store your eggs, the best time to do this is before starting cancer treatment. In some cases, it can also be done after treatment has started or between different treatments.

How long will it take?

The process of preparing and retrieving the eggs from your ovaries takes a minimum of 2 weeks.

If you decide to choose cryopreservation

Once you and your healthcare provider decide cryopreservation is an option, you will meet with a reproductive endocrinology and infertility (REI) doctor outside of Seattle Children's. REI doctors specialize in helping people who have problems with fertility become pregnant. Your REI doctor will discuss the step-by-step process of oocyte cryopreservation and will guide you through the procedure.

Steps to egg cryopreservation includes:

- Checking your baseline fertility and ovarian reserve (ovary egg count).
- Stimulating the ovaries to produce several eggs by using hormone shots in the skin or muscle 1 to 3 times a day for 12 days.
- Monitoring your body's response to the hormone shots (blood tests and vaginal ultrasounds).
- Having a simple surgery to retrieve eggs and place them in cold storage.
- After egg retrieval, your eggs will be carefully handled, frozen and stored.

You may have a bit of bleeding and discomfort in your lower abdomen area for a few days after the procedure. Most feel fine within 1 to 2 days after the procedure. Some women notice a difference in their menstrual flow after this procedure and some may notice that their next period may be heavier than usual.

How long can my eggs be stored?

The eggs can be stored for many years until you are ready to become a parent. When you decide you are ready to become a parent, the frozen egg can be thawed and fertilized with sperm, outside of the body. The fertilized egg can be implanted into the uterus.

How much will this cost me or my family?

Oocyte cryopreservation is expensive and your health insurance may not cover the costs. Your healthcare team will talk to you more about how much it will cost and any financial assistance available to you.

Web resources

- Visit savemyfertility.org. An online fertility preservation toolkit for patients and their providers.
- Learn about the personal journeys of three female cancer patients. Visit seattlechildrens.org/videos/cancer-treatments-womans-fertility/.
- Visit Livestrong's Becoming a Parent After Cancer webpage at livestrong.org/we-can-help/fertility-services/