



Adopt an egg

Most people don't think about egg donation until they try to have a baby and can't. We investigate how it works and what it means for donors, parents and children.

If you desperately wanted a child but discovered it wasn't possible because your eggs aren't viable, what would you do? Many couples find themselves in this position, but today, there is a solution. Since the first egg donation pregnancy in South Africa in 1986, more and more couples are slowly starting to consider it.

WHY EGG DONATION?

Not all women can conceive naturally. For many, intrauterine insemination

(IUI) or in vitro fertilisation (IVF) are possible options, but some women's egg cells aren't viable at all, and the only way for them to experience pregnancy is through egg donation.

Colleen Oates, the founder of the Babymiracles donor programme and the first woman in South Africa to conceive a baby through the trans-vaginal IVF method, says, "The older you get, the older your eggs get. It's a scary thought, especially when you don't feel old. And for some women,

this happens at a much younger age."

Today, many women are choosing to have children later in life. Unfortunately, we don't have an endless supply of eggs. Dr Sascha Edelstein, a fertility specialist at Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital in Cape Town, explains, "Women are born with a finite number of oocytes (eggs) that decline in both quantity and quality over time. After age 36, there's a decline in reproductive potential, which is further accelerated at age 39, and the average age for cessation of natural fertility is 41.

But are there many other reasons why a woman, even in her early 20s, might have trouble with her ovarian reserve. If she's had ovarian surgery, such as the removal of endometriosis or cysts, or if she's been exposed to toxins like chemotherapy or radiotherapy, her reserves can be depleted. In these cases, egg donation is the only option.

An encouraging factor in favour of using egg donation is the success rate of donor pregnancies. Ideal donors are between ages 21 and 34. "The success of egg donation cycles is proportional to the age of the egg donor, with some reports of pregnancy rates greater than 40% per egg donor treatment cycle," says Sascha.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHILD?

When the age-old question, "Where do babies come from?" pops up, Tertia Albertyn, co-founder of Nurture, one of South Africa's leading egg donor programmes, believes that if the situation is handled in the right way, there shouldn't be any problems. The family should decide upfront whether or not to tell their child. "While some parents choose not to, the expert opinion is to tell 'early and often'. Make the donor egg part of the child's birth story and it becomes a non-issue for them."

Lynette Dean, a clinical psychologist at the Fertility Unit in Port Elizabeth, feels that children are only affected negatively if they find out by accident, because they may feel betrayed. She suggests that parents talk about it as soon as their child starts asking questions. She says, "Don't overwhelm them with all the facts – make the explanation age-appropriate. If children assimilate this information into their identities early, they become comfortable with it, and generally accept that they aren't different to other children. I also sometimes tell the couple to say: 'Mom and Dad wanted you so badly that we would have done anything to have you!'"

Colleen says, "Children from donor eggs may have another woman's genes, but they develop in the environment of your womb and emotions, they grow up in your family and they're your children.

"The couple may be concerned about the type of person donating the eggs and what her motivation is. However, egg donors are all psychologically and medically screened."

Donors often ask me: 'How will I know that this child will be happy and won't be abused?' All I can say is that the parents have waited so long and have longed to have a child, that the baby will probably be spoilt!"

Before embarking on this procedure, it's important to understand how it works.

HOW DOES EGG DONATION WORK?

At Nurture, the donation process is explained in four stages:

Stage 1: Selection/screening

First, the donor fills out a questionnaire, providing information about her eye colour, hair colour, weight and height. Most couples choose a donor who's similar to the mother in appearance, education, interests, hobbies and family health history.

Then a profile of the donor is set up under a pseudonym, with address and contact details removed. The profile is placed on the Nurture website, with password protection, along with some childhood photos of the donor. Donor egg receivers can then sift through the donor profiles until they find the right one.

The donor then has 48 hours to decide whether she still wants to proceed. If she agrees, the pre-cycle screening begins. This includes a one-hour doctor's appointment for a pelvic examination, ultrasound and blood tests (for conditions like HIV and hepatitis). There will also be an important hour-long consultation with a registered psychologist, to make sure the donor understands and is fully prepared for the process.

Since Nurture is only a donor programme, this is where their obligation ends and the chosen fertility clinic takes over. However, they still offer

support to the donor throughout the rest of the process.

Stage 2: Synchronisation and stimulation

First the cycles of the donor and recipient are synchronised by beginning a series of injections that stimulates the growth of the eggs. The recipient receives medication that thickens the lining of her uterus to prepare it for the fertilised eggs. During this time, the donor undergoes frequent ultrasounds to monitor the growth and development of the follicles until they're mature.

Stage 3: Egg retrieval

Once the eggs are mature, the donor undergoes a 15–30-minute procedure involving an ultrasound directed needle aspiration under twilight anaesthetic (a mild dose of general anaesthesia is administered which sedates the patient but she can still follow simple directions from the doctor. This is known as being in a "twilight" state.). This means there's no incision, and the donor is comfortable and pain-free.

Stage 4: Fertilisation and embryo transfer

Once the eggs are retrieved, the laboratory staff begin the process of fertilisation. Once the embryo is at the right stage of development – usually about three to five days later – it's transferred to the recipient's uterus.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

First is the cost of the donor agency or programme. This fee is for helping you find the right donor, keeping accurate records, and support and compensation for the donor during the egg donation treatment. Then there's the cost of the fertility clinic for the actual egg donation treatment. At South African fertility clinics, the cost ranges from R30 000 to R60 000. ■

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What are the implications for the parents?

Coming to terms with the need to use egg donation can be difficult for couples. Lynette explains that women will go through a grieving process at the prospect of not having their own genetic children. Couples must communicate with each other and agree on the process.

She says, "Some women feel as if they won't be the 'mother' of the child born from an egg donor. I try to help them understand that carrying a baby doesn't necessarily make you a mother. It's the love and care you give the child that make you a mother."

"The couple may be concerned about the type of person donating the eggs and what her motivation is. However, egg donors are all psychologically and medically screened."

THE LEGAL ASPECTS

There are two laws that protect both the donor and the recipient:

1. THE HUMAN TISSUE ACT

It's illegal to buy or sell any type of human tissue. Therefore, it's illegal for egg donors to be paid. It has to be voluntary. But they can be reimbursed for petrol money, time away from work and discomfort. At Nurture, the rate of compensation is R5 000, as guided by the South African Medical Ethics Committee.

2. THE CHILDREN'S ACT

This states that the birth mother is the legal mother, so the egg donor has no rights to the child. Sascha explains that this act also allows the children to access medical information about their genetic parents.

WHAT DO THE DONORS SAY?

For Ally*, who has gone through the process four times, egg donation isn't about the money. "I love being able to help other people have kids," she says.

She remembers one painful procedure that had her "doubled up in pain for two days", while the next three were "like having a small dental procedure." She explains that each donation is different, and each donor experiences it differently.

Egg donation is still a contentious topic. Some people may think it's a moral issue, while others feel that infertility is a disease and the reproductive system gets affected just like the rest of the body. And for many, donation may just be their last chance of having their own baby.

TRUE STORY

Another donor, Melissa*, has donated three times, which resulted in two pregnancies for the same parents (they wanted genetically similar children). A close friend of hers had suffered from infertility and miscarriages, and Melissa wanted to help someone else in need. "Donating was relatively painless, and I'm glad I got the chance to help an infertile couple have a family." **IBI**

* Names have been changed

DONOR AGENCIES

- Nurture www.nurture.co.za
- Babymiracles www.babymiracles.co.za
- Egg Donation SA www.eggdonationsouthafrica.co.za
- Gift of Life www.giftovlife.com
- Baby2mom Visit www.baby2mom.co.za