

FEMALE FERTILITY AND AGE

What is fertility?

Fertility is the ability to achieve a pregnancy. Infertility is when there is no pregnancy after 12 months or more of trying.

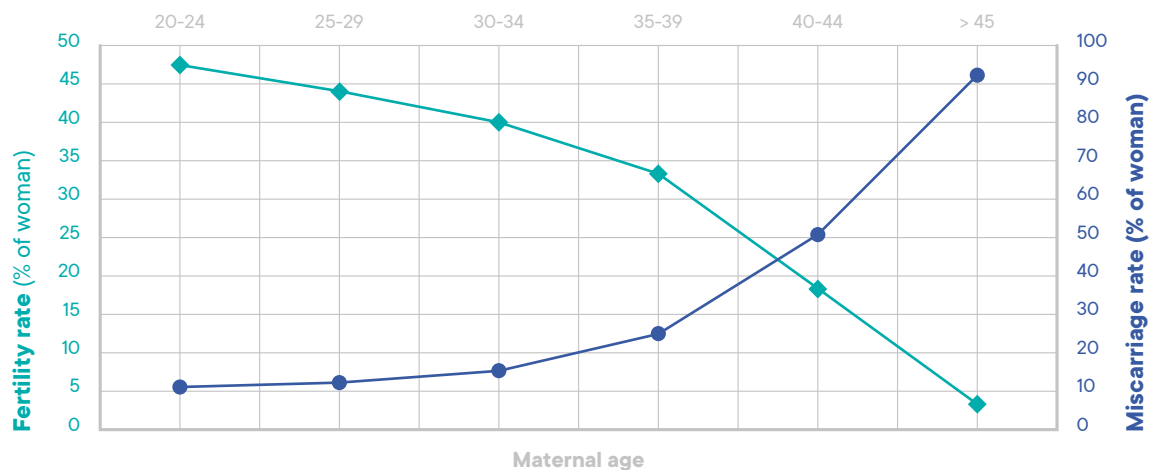


Female fertility changes with age

Women become fertile when they have gone through puberty and are no longer fertile a few years before menopause. Menopause usually occurs between ages 45-55 and is confirmed when a woman hasn't had a period for one year.

Generally, it becomes more difficult for women to get pregnant once they reach their mid-30s, and in their 40s, natural pregnancies are rare. By their mid-40s most women will no longer be able to become pregnant naturally or with assisted reproduction, such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF)—see info leaflet on IVF. The graph below shows how female fertility declines with age and the risk of miscarriage increases. If women are unable to become pregnant with their own eggs, they can use donor eggs, which are usually provided by women under the age of 35.

Your Fertile Years

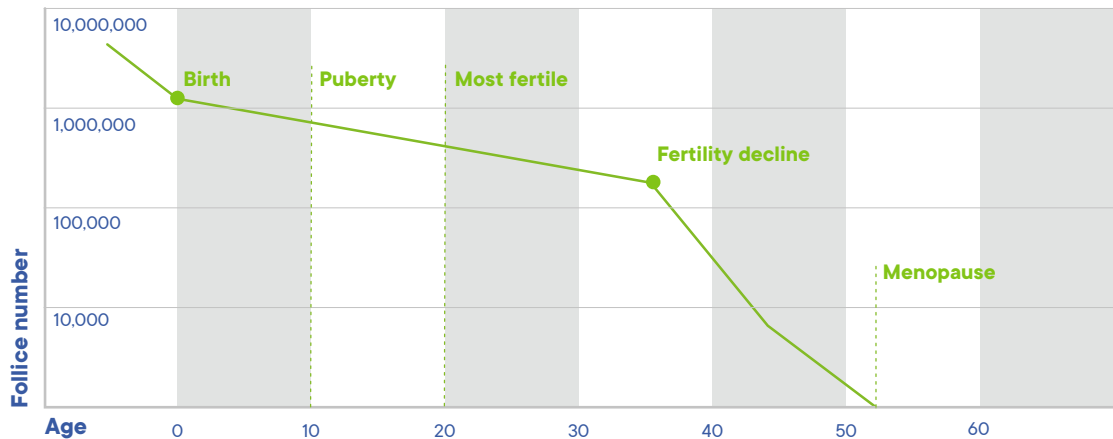


The quantity and quality of eggs

Fertility declines because the quantity and quality of eggs decrease as a woman ages.

Women are born with all the eggs they will ever have. A baby girl is born with about 1-2 million eggs. These stay dormant until puberty, but many are reabsorbed by the body, so by puberty there are only around 200-400,000 eggs left. With each menstrual cycle, usually only one egg matures and is ovulated and up to 1000 are reabsorbed. By around age 37, almost all of the eggs have gone and by menopause there are no viable eggs left. Throughout a woman's reproductive life, she ovulates about 500 eggs.

The quality of eggs is also affected by age, making them less likely to result in a pregnancy. The egg contains one set of chromosomes from the mother. As women age, the chromosomes in the egg can become imbalanced. This increases the risk of having a child with a chromosome disorder such as Down's syndrome and the risk of pregnancy loss (miscarriage). Approximately 70-80% of miscarriages are due to chromosome imbalances and the risk of miscarriage increases with a woman's age, as shown in the graph above.



Can female fertility decline be prevented?

The short answer is no, but here are some things you can do to take care of your fertility if you want to have children now or in the future:

- Eat healthy food
- Stop smoking
- Stop drinking alcohol
- Be physically active
- Maintain a healthy weight

