

# FERTILITY CHECKS FROM 25?

Consultant gynaecologist at King Edward VII's Hospital, Mr Michael Dooley, has called for women to start having fertility checks from the age of 25 in order to maximise their chances of successfully having a child, as well as a new sex education programme in schools.

Dooley believes that women are unaware of how quickly their fertility declines with age and believes it should be taught as part of sex education lessons, so by the time women reach their twenties, regular check-ups have commenced. However, other experts believe that early stage testing could negatively impact a young woman's life choices.

Mr Dooley said: "I frequently see patients who have no clue when it comes to their fertility and many couples try for years before seeking medical advice. It is my dream to start a conversation and change this culture. Education and frequent testing will change lives, helping many people to successfully start a family." He told the MailOnline: "Teenagers know about Chlamydia. But do they know it can be associated with blocked fallopian tubes and infertility? Do they know smoking is bad for your lungs, bad for your heart, bad for fertility? Do they know that if their mother went through the menopause at 32, they are likely to be the same? There's a knowledge gap."

Dooley is a strong advocate for better education and earlier testing. "We get our cars checked once a year, yet why don't we get our fertility regularly checked? For a couple trying for a family, a fertility check can be life-changing," he said.

His comments were inspired by a study at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, which assessed 300 years of fertility data from 58,000 women. The results indicated that women hoping to have three children naturally should begin trying from the age of 23, and that 32 is the latest at which a woman should try to conceive if she wants to maintain at least a 90%



chance of getting pregnant without fertility treatment.

"These results are going to shock a generation of women who are putting their careers first and families second. I am calling on educators and parents across the UK to not only teach young people about contraception, but also about the reality of their fertility," said Mr Dooley.

He also recommended that women should consider freezing their eggs from the age of 30. "The option of offering egg freezing is an insurance policy. And like an insurance policy on your car, I hope you never have to use it. It's still early days, the studies show it isn't quite as good as IVF but it's better than nothing."

Fertility testing from the age of 25 could be as simple as filling out a questionnaire. Indeed, Mr Dooley has developed the 'Fit for Fertility Checklist' which takes around 10 minutes, and includes

questions such as 'Do you have pain with intercourse?' and 'Do you have diabetes?' The answer to questions such as these could illuminate whether or not a patient might benefit from a blood test. The checklist could also help pinpoint areas in a person's health or lifestyle that might affect their fertility, including their stress levels, and intake of alcohol, caffeine, recreational drugs and tobacco.

Aside from participating in Mr Dooley's 'Fit for Fertility' tests, younger women wanting to get checked currently have limited options. Private clinics such as the London Women's Clinic currently offer 'Fertility MOTs' for £370, including an ultrasound scan, blood tests, and consultation. However, the results of such tests will only indicate fertility levels at the woman's current age and expire after one year.

Sexual health specialist Dr Verity Sullivan disagrees with Michael

Dooley's suggestion of frequent earlier testing, saying: "It's expensive and if it's just for the sake of knowing, it's not urgent so won't change your life in any immediate way. It's not a realistic or sustainable option." Her primary concern regards how the results of such early stage tests could impact on young women. "I think it's very reasonable that women want to know that information about themselves, but you have to be very sure about how it's going to change your life if you were going to find out there was a problem with your fertility."

With the NHS already struggling to provide treatment and testing for all couples experiencing issues with fertility, it seems unlikely that free testing for those not yet trying to conceive will be available in the near future. However, better education and awareness of fertility from an earlier age is a much more realistic proposition.