

Hollywood Happy Endings?

Not the Norm
in Real Life

By Sue Spiry

Everyone loves a happy ending. But what happens in Hollywood does not often translate to real life—especially when it comes to a woman's fertility.

If you read the headlines, you might believe that women can now choose to become pregnant at almost any age. Marcia Cross had twins at age 44, and Holly Hunter at age 47. Kelly Preston, also age 47, announced that she and husband John Travolta are now expecting another child.

What often goes unsaid is that many older celebrity moms do not conceive their babies naturally, and often undergo rounds of in vitro fertilization (IVF), or use donor eggs or other reproductive technologies. In reality, only about 2% of babies in the U.S. are born to mothers over the age of 40.

It is a biological fact that fertility decreases with advancing maternal age. According to Dr. Halina Wiczyc, a reproductive endocrinologist at Baystate Reproductive Medicine, women experience diminished ovarian reserve as the ovaries age. In fact, while the chance of becoming pregnant in any single month is about 25% in women under 30, it's only about 5% for women after 40, and continues to decrease very year.

In addition, as a woman matures into her late 30s and early 40s, the eggs inside the ovaries undergo changes that are not reversible. This often results in eggs with chromosome problems. When chromosomally abnormal eggs are released and fertilized, the resulting embryo is less likely to survive, and miscarriage is likely. Women aged 40 are three times more likely to miscarry than women aged 30.

Because of the higher rate of gynecologic disease and ovarian aging, woman over age 35 should seek help sooner than younger women, says Dr. Daniel Grow, reproductive endocrinologist and chair of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology at Baystate Medical Center. Women under age 35 are encouraged to try becoming pregnant for up to a year before seeking help. However, women over age 35 should have a complete evaluation after six months of trying.

In general, says Wiczyc, a woman who wants to use her own eggs should be age 43 or younger. To use an egg donor, she must be enrolled in the Egg Donor Program at Baystate by age 45. "The American Society for Reproductive Medicine has not established a cut-off, but most doctors will not go beyond age 50," she says.

Ellen Tougias, RN, a nurse with Baystate Reproductive Medicine, says, "It's irresponsible to give women false hope. Our doctors are always honest about a woman's chances. It's important that patients know they are not always going to leave with a pregnancy."

In its most recent report on in vitro fertilization (IVF) success rates (2007), the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology (SART) identifies Baystate Reproductive Medicine as the program with the highest IVF success rates in the state of Massachusetts in all age categories while adhering to the guidelines for numbers of embryos to transfer.

If you are experiencing difficulty conceiving a child, talk with your doctor or certified nurse-midwife, or call Baystate Reproductive Medicine at 413-794-7045.

EGG DONATION: A DIFFERENCE THAT LASTS A LIFETIME

A donor egg cycle is an IVF cycle that involves two women. The donor's ovaries are stimulated and mature eggs are retrieved. The donor eggs are combined with the recipient couple's sperm, and the resulting embryos are transferred into the recipient woman's uterus in the hope that implantation and pregnancy will occur.

If you are interested in becoming an egg donor, you must be a woman between the ages of 21 and 33, a non-smoker, and in good health. Egg donors are compensated \$7000 after a completed cycle.

To learn more about how you can help couples achieve what may be their only chance to have a biologically related child, please call Baystate Health Link at 413-794-7045 or visit baystatehealth.org/brm.

