



Risks and complications of assisted conception

INTRODUCTION

No medical treatment is entirely free from risk and infertility treatment is no exception. It is important, however, to appreciate that most patients go through IVF and other assisted conception treatments without any problems at all.

The risks associated with infertility treatment can be considered over six categories:

- The risks associated with the drugs used to stimulate ovaries
- The surgical risks associated with egg collection
- Laboratory issues and risks
- The risks associated with pregnancy
- The risks of an abnormal pregnancy
- Psychological and emotional risks

SURGICAL RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EGG COLLECTION

Intravenous sedation

Patients undergoing IVF and related treatments will generally receive intravenous drugs through their veins to make them drowsy and make egg collection comfortable. This is generally a very safe procedure, but very occasionally there will be an adverse reaction to drugs or other complication. The risk of serious harm is very low, 1 in 10,000, and is similar to that of other surgery.

Risk of damage to other structures

The ovaries are surrounded by important structures, including bowel, bladder, ureters, the uterus and major blood vessels. It is theoretically possible to puncture one of these structures although the likelihood is very low. The risk of a significant haemorrhage from an internal blood vessel is approximately 1 in 2,500. If significant damage occurs to internal organs or other structures then usually a laparoscopy is required to look inside the pelvis to assess any potential damage. This means a telescope needs to be passed through the abdominal wall to see inside the pelvis. A general anaesthetic is needed for a laparoscopy.

Pelvic infection

Removal of eggs involves passing a needle through the vaginal wall into the ovary and it is possible to introduce infection into the ovary. This possibility is increased if there is an endometriotic cyst in the ovary at the time of treatment. This complication may cause pelvic pain and other signs of infection developing in the weeks after the procedure. It is treated with antibiotics but may very rarely require abdominal surgery to drain an abscess. The risk of serious pelvic infection is likely to be less than 1 in 1000.

Embryo transfer

The placement of embryos into the cavity of the uterus (womb) is usually a relatively simple procedure. There are virtually no risks to the female. Despite taking great care with this procedure the catheter does not always pass through the cervix easily and sometimes the embryos get caught in the mucus. This can usually be recognized with careful checking of the catheter after the transfer procedure is carried out. In these cases a further attempt can be made to replace the embryo(s) in the uterus. Very rarely, one or more of the embryos may be lost during the transfer process. If this happens at the time of transfer and it can't be certain whether embryo(s) have been replaced, then further embryos may not be transferred.