

Patient Information Teenage and Young Adult Cancers

Fertility Preservation: Egg Freezing

Introduction

Finding out that you have cancer can bring many uncertainties, and thinking about whether you'll be able to have children one day might not be something you're focused on right now. However, it's natural to want to keep your options open for having children later in life. This information is here to help you understand how cancer treatment could affect your ability to have children, and what you can do to preserve your fertility before treatment starts. Having an early conversation with a member of your cancer care team is important. They can give you personalised advice and help you make informed choices that fit with your future plans.

What is fertility?

Fertility is the ability to have children. For females, egg freezing preserves the option to have biological children in the future.

How does cancer treatment affect fertility?

Cancer treatments often have side effects that impact healthy tissues in the body. While some side effects are temporary and improve after treatment, others can be long-lasting or permanent. For young women, one of the most significant long-term effects can be reduced fertility.

Not all cancers or cancer treatments affect fertility, but understanding the potential risks before starting treatment is important. This can help you make informed choices about preserving your ability to try for children in the future.

The main types of cancer treatments – chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery, hormonal therapy, and targeted therapy – each work differently and may affect fertility in different ways. The chance of your fertility being affected depends on factors such as your age and the type and location of cancer.

It's important to discuss your treatment plan with your cancer care team as early as possible. They can help you understand the risks to your fertility and guide you through options for preserving it, allowing you to make a choice that fits with your future goals.

What is fertility preservation?

Fertility preservation involves collecting and freezing your eggs (egg freezing) so that you have the option to try for children in the future using those eggs. While some cancer treatments may not affect fertility, others can reduce or completely prevent your ability to produce healthy eggs. Because of this, your cancer team may recommend that you meet with a specialist fertility nurse or doctor. They will explain the fertility preservation process, outline your options, and answer any questions you may have.

If you decide to go ahead with a consultation for fertility preservation, you will be referred to the Fertility Centre closest to you but this may not be your local hospital. Your cancer team and fertility specialists will work together to carefully plan and coordinate your fertility preservation with your cancer treatment, ensuring everything is managed smoothly and efficiently.

What is involved in egg freezing?

Egg freezing is a method of preserving your fertility by storing your eggs before cancer treatment starts. Egg freezing involves a few steps:

- You'll get hormone injections to help your body produce multiple eggs.
- Your progress will be monitored with ultrasound scans and blood tests.
- When the eggs are ready, they'll be collected during a short surgical procedure where you will receive medication that will make you drowsy and keep you calm.
- The mature eggs are then frozen and stored.

Are there any side effects?

Young women's ovaries often respond well to the hormone injections, which can increase the small risk of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS). OHSS is a potentially serious reaction to the hormone injections where overstimulated ovaries enlarge and release chemicals that can cause blood vessels to leak.

This risk is reduced by carefully selecting the type and dose of hormone injections. Around one-third of individuals experience mild OHSS, which can usually be managed at home with pain relief and prescribed medication for a few days.

How long will I be in hospital for?

You can normally go home one to two hours after the egg collection procedure. Some light bleeding is normal, and any stomach pain usually goes away within 12 hours with pain relief.

Who is eligible for NHS egg storage?

To qualify for NHS egg storage, you must meet specific criteria for fertility preservation. In Scotland, the current eligibility requirements are:

- You must be under 40 years of age.
- Your BMI must be under 35.
- You must not have any biological children.
- You must not have undergone sterilisation.

However, separate criteria apply to access NHS-funded fertility treatment to use your stored eggs in the future. These criteria may change over time, and it is not possible to know what the requirements will be in the future.

What will happen when I see the fertility specialist?

During the appointment, the doctor or specialist nurse will explain the available options for preserving your fertility. If there is enough time to complete fertility preservation before starting your cancer treatment, the specialist will talk you through the relevant procedures.

If you choose to go ahead, you will need to complete consent forms for the treatment and storage of your eggs, as well as have a blood test to check for infections. These steps are necessary to ensure your eggs can be safely stored, meeting regulatory requirements for potential future use.

If it is decided that your eggs cannot be frozen, you will be informed, and the options, if appropriate, will be discussed with you.

What are the legal implications of storing eggs

In the UK, the use and storage of eggs are regulated by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). Under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990), you must provide written consent for the following:

- The storage of your eggs
- The duration for which your eggs can be stored
- The purposes for which your eggs can be used
- Your wishes regarding the stored eggs
- What should happen to your eggs in the event of your death or if you become unable to change or withdraw your consent (these are standard questions for all patients considering fertility preservation)

The maximum storage period for your eggs is currently 55 years, but consent must be renewed every 10 years.

Once your eggs are stored, you must maintain communication with the storage centre. Notify them immediately of any changes to your contact details, such as a new address, to ensure they can stay in touch with you. If the storage centre cannot contact you they may no longer be legally allowed to store your eggs and will be required to discard them.

If you decide to stop storing your eggs, you will need to contact the storage centre to arrange for them to be discarded.

Will my cancer treatment have to be postponed if I choose egg freezing?

Egg freezing typically takes two to three weeks to complete. If your cancer treatment can be safely delayed for this period, your specialist can refer you to discuss fertility preservation options, including egg freezing. However, if your cancer treatment needs to start urgently, there may not be enough time to complete egg freezing before starting treatment. In these situations, other options might be considered.

What if I don't want to go ahead at this stage?

If you decide not to go ahead with egg freezing at this stage, that is completely okay. The decision is entirely yours. It's natural to feel uncertain, and taking more time to think things over is perfectly acceptable. If you're unsure, it may help to talk it through with your healthcare team, fertility specialist, or a counsellor to better understand your options.

Opting out of egg freezing will not impact your cancer treatment, and you can explore other options to build a family in the future if you change your mind.

Are there any alternatives if I can't freeze my eggs before treatment starts?

If you decide not to freeze your eggs before your cancer treatment or it is not possible before your treatment, fertility options in the future may be reduced. There are still other ways to build a family. Please see below for information on using donor eggs or adoption.

Can I have fertility treatment after recovery from cancer treatment?

Depending on how your fertility is affected, you may still be able to have fertility treatment after your cancer recovery. If your ovaries start producing eggs again, fertility treatment using your own eggs could be an option. If using your own eggs isn't possible, you could talk about other options:

- **Use of Donor Eggs:** If you can't produce eggs after cancer treatment, using donor eggs for fertility treatments might be an option when you're ready to start a family.
- **Adoption:** Adoption is another way to have children. You can explore it at any time, and it offers a path to becoming a parent if having a biological child isn't possible.

It's important to talk about these alternatives with your fertility specialist and cancer care team so you can choose the best option for your medical situation, treatment plan, and family goals. Each option has different things to consider, and your cancer care team can give you personalised guidance.

What is ovarian tissue cryopreservation

Ovarian tissue cryopreservation is a fertility preservation option where a small piece of ovarian tissue, containing immature eggs, is surgically removed (keyhole surgery) and frozen. This can be useful for young women when egg freezing isn't feasible. Currently, using this tissue requires a second surgery to transplant it back into the body.

Will I get post-treatment fertility testing?

There is no single test to determine whether your fertility has returned completely. While the return of regular periods is a good sign, it doesn't guarantee that you are fertile.

Who can help me decide what to do?

Your doctors and nurses can provide guidance as you make this decision about egg freezing. Visiting the fertility centre does not mean you have to go ahead with egg freezing, but it will give you the opportunity to explore your options fully.

It's also important to lean on your usual support network, such as family, friends or community support groups, to help you decide what's best for you.

Counsellors, while not directly involved in your medical care, can offer valuable support in helping you decide whether to go ahead with fertility preservation, including egg freezing, and provide additional emotional support throughout the process.

How can I access fertility counselling

If time allows, you will have the opportunity to meet with one of our fertility counsellors before freezing your eggs. All of our counsellors are members of the British Infertility Counselling Association (BICA). During your session, the counsellor will discuss your options and help you explore your thoughts and feelings about freezing your eggs. It is also a chance for you to ask any questions you may have.

Please note that counselling is not part of the assessment process and will not affect your treatment. If you would like additional support, further counselling appointments are available before, during, or after your treatment.

Can I change my mind?

Yes, you can change your mind at any time about egg freezing. It's normal to feel uncertain or anxious about the process, and speaking with a counsellor or fertility doctor can help you work through your feelings. However, having these discussions does not mean you have to freeze your eggs.

Do I need to use contraception?

While cancer treatment may affect your fertility, it is impossible to know for certain whether you can still get pregnant. Some treatments can damage eggs, which could potentially affect a pregnancy if conception occurs during treatment. Therefore, it is vital to prevent pregnancy if you are sexually active during cancer treatment and for up to a year after your treatment ends.

It is equally important to practice safe sex to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Using a condom during sexual activity is strongly recommended to ensure both your safety and your partner's.

What do I do when I wish to use the stored eggs?

If you have any questions about your fertility or are considering using your stored eggs, ask your GP for a referral to your local fertility centre, preferably the one where your eggs are stored, for further advice and support.

It's also important to note that additional criteria must be met to access NHS fertility treatment using your stored eggs in the future. These criteria may change over time, and it is not possible to know what the requirements will be in the years to come. Current criteria can be found here – [Access Criteria NHS IVF Treatment Scotland – Fertility Network](#).

Want to find out more? – Useful contacts and websites

If you would like to learn more about fertility preservation or access support, the following resources may be helpful:

- **HFEA Website: Egg Freezing**
[Egg freezing | HFEA.](#)
- **HFEA Website: Fertility Preservation**
[Fertility preservation | HFEA.](#)
- **HFEA: Information for Trans and Non-Binary People**
[Information for trans and non-binary people seeking fertility treatment | HFEA.](#)
- **British Infertility Counselling Association (BICA)**
[BICA: Professional Infertility Counselling Association in the UK](#)
– Provides specialised counselling for individuals undergoing fertility treatment and preservation.
- **Macmillan Cancer Support**
[Macmillan Cancer Support](#) – Macmillan provide information, support and guidance, to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can.
- **Teenage Cancer Trust**
[Teenage Cancer Trust](#) – Teenage Cancer Trust provide specialised nursing care and support for young people with cancer. Supporting anyone diagnosed with cancer aged 13-24, and their loved ones too.
- **Cancer Research UK: Fertility and Cancer**
[Cancer and Fertility | Cancer Research UK](#) – Comprehensive information on how cancer treatments can impact fertility and the options available.
- **Clic Sargent (Young Lives vs Cancer)**
[The six ways we help - Young Lives vs Cancer](#) and [Young Lives vs Cancer](#) – Support for children and young adults with cancer, including information on fertility preservation.

Additional resources

- **The Fertility Alliance**
[The Fertility Alliance](#) – A national fertility charity offering support and accurate information for anyone who wants to know more about their fertility.
- **Fertility Network UK**
[Fertility Network UK](#) – A charity providing support and information on all aspects of fertility, including preservation options.
- **NHS Fertility Services**
[Infertility | NHS inform](#) – Guidance on NHS fertility services and infertility information.
- **British Fertility Society**
[For the public » British Fertility Society](#) – Information on fertility and fertility preservation



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