

Advanced maternal age

Life



Women in the United States are experiencing unprecedented opportunities to pursue education and professional careers. One potential downside to this situation is that women find themselves putting off starting a family until they complete their education and feel comfortable in their employment. In many cases this can extend into the woman's late 30's or even early 40's. Advanced maternal age may also have negative effects on fertility and the outcomes of a successful pregnancy. Considering all the factors, a woman should consider putting off starting a family and build a career as long as she has educated herself on all the risks of advanced maternal age.

For years, women have been under the assumption that as long as they were bearing children under the age of 35, fertility and child mortality were at a minimum. Recent studies have shown that this assumption is far from the truth and may eliminate childbearing for those women who wait into their late 30's and early 40's to start having children. Education for women by gynecologists and obstetricians has been insufficient and most women are “. . . surprised—even shocked—to learn that fertility begins to fall in their late 20's (Hatcher, 2002).” Most women are finding out too late that they have simply put off having children too long and are now unable to bear children without intervention. Fertility treatments are an expensive option, but are only available to those that can afford the treatments that insurance does not cover.

Pregnancies that do occur at advanced maternal age have lower success rates. Increased maternal age, typically over the age of 35, carries higher chances of miscarriage; higher increases in pregnancy complications like high blood pressure, diabetes, and placental problems; and increased chance

of having a child with a chromosomal disorder (Children's Specialist, 2007). The good news is that medical advances in prenatal and perinatal care have diminished the effects that many of these complications have on pregnancies at advanced maternal age. Safe pregnancies after the age of 35 are occurring at much higher rates with advanced blood testing and ultrasounds that allow early detection and treatment of potential problems.

For many modern women, pursuing education and professional careers are the norm. More women than ever in history are pursuing careers, not just jobs that add extra income. Most career paths take years to build in order to reach the top of success. The drive to achieve and succeed has pushed many women toward putting off starting a family till their careers are firmly on track. With medical care helping to make child bearing in later years safer, women are choosing to put careers before family. There are many advantages for women to wait to start a family:

- Financial stability
- Relationship stability
- Increased maturity
- Increased life experiences
- Larger support networks
- Better education

Although these advantages may be present for a younger mother, the chance of a woman having all the advantages increases with age. These advantages allow the mother to provide the best possible start for the child and to be the best mother she has the potential to be.

The dilemma remains that when women take themselves out of the workforce to bear a child, a disadvantage occurs when compared to male counterparts. An argument can be made that a woman with an established career and older age may have a better chance of regaining status once she returns to work due to her previous proven results and successes. A younger woman just starting out in a career and taking a leave of absence to bear a child will not have a consistent track record to fall back on once she returns to work. The advantage that an advanced maternal age woman has may be the difference between a successful return to a career rather than being passed over for those who are not choosing to bear children. The dilemma to put off childbearing looms large for many career women and must be considered along with the risks of advanced maternal age.

There is hope for women who choose to honor both children and careers. Proper education, healthy lifestyles, current medical advances, and pure determination help women of advanced maternal age have the balanced lives they desire. While it is true that fertility declines in the late 20's and that “. . . women perform best at childbearing when they are young. . . (Gosden, 1995)”, these factors should not be the only consideration when choosing between careers and families. “ For reasons still far from clear, human evolution has allowed the female reproductive system to age faster than other body parts (Gosden, 1995).” The mental aspect of child rearing and career advancement need to be fully considered. Physically, advanced maternal age does carry risks to both mother and fetus, but medical advances have severely reduced the chances of unsuccessful pregnancy outcomes. Mentally, women who have built successful careers are better fit

to raise children in later years rather than rushing to bear children in early years to avoid the physical risk.

In all, advanced maternal age carries risks with fertility and successful pregnancy outcomes, but as long as the woman is educated on these risks, putting off child bearing should be considered in order to foster a successful career. Medical advances have decreased pregnancy risks and advanced maternal age women should take full advantage to have a balanced life filled with both career and family.

References

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