

By Amy Norton
NEW YORK (Reuters Health)

Sperm Banking Gives Cancer Patients Emotional Lift

Sperm banking may not only preserve young cancer patients' ability to have children, but their emotional well-being as well, according to Japanese researchers.

They found that among 51 young men who banked their sperm before undergoing chemotherapy, 80 percent said that the move helped them in the "emotional battle against cancer." Even those who were unsure whether they wanted to have children in the future gained some peace of mind from sperm banking, according to the researchers.

Infertility is a potential risk of chemotherapy, and a particularly troubling one for younger cancer patients. One option for men is cryopreservation -- freezing and storing sperm -- before chemotherapy so that they and their partners can later conceive through assisted reproduction.

Since doctors can't predict which men will recover their normal sperm production after cancer treatment, it makes sense for all young patients to bank sperm before beginning therapy, Dr. Kazuo Saito, the lead author of the new study, told Reuters Health.

However, research suggests that only 10 percent to 20 percent of young men do so, according to Saito, who is with Yokohama City University Medical Center.

To see how sperm banking affects men's emotional well-being as they deal with a cancer diagnosis, the researchers gave questionnaires to a group of patients whose sperm had been banked at their center before chemotherapy.

Most of the men were treated for testicular cancer, while the rest had leukemia, lymphoma or other cancers.

The large majority said that sperm banking gave them an emotional lift during their cancer fight, according to findings published in the journal *Cancer*. And 80 percent said they would recommend sperm banking to other men with the same disease.

About half of the patients banked their sperm on a doctor's recommendation, while the rest made the decision on their own, Saito's team found.

"We believe that many cancer physicians don't understand the significance of sperm cryopreservation," Saito said, noting that before 1990, the technology did not allow doctors to successfully use frozen sperm to achieve a pregnancy.

All cancer specialists, Saito said, should inform patients about the potential reproductive side effects of treatment and about the option of sperm banking. Continued ...However, the researchers stress, sperm banking is not a total answer to the problem of treatment-related infertility. One obstacle for some patients is the cost of freezing and storing sperm.

Moreover, Saito's team found, many men in their study still worried about becoming infertile, despite having banked their sperm. All of the patients said they hoped their fertility would be restored at some point after treatment.

This, the researchers say, points to the importance of developing new chemotherapy methods that are less of a threat to patients' fertility. "We should not be satisfied with simply banking their sperm," they conclude.

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