

BOURN HALL ADVISES IVF PATIENTS: KEEP COOL THIS SUMMER

If you are trying for a baby do not roast in the sun this summer. This is the advice from Bourn Hall Clinic, the world's first IVF clinic. The Clinic has observed a decline in sperm count in some men when they return for treatment after the summer. Although the body is adapted to keep the testes cool, extremes of temperature have been shown to damage sperm production.

“Many people do not realise that sperm released now were made and matured over the previous 8 weeks,” comments Dr Thomas Mathews, Medical Director at Bourn Hall Clinic. Dr Mathews goes on to say, “At the initial consultation men may have a normal sperm count, but in some cases this has declined when we check again before treatment, which may be several months later depending on their partner's cycle. If the man has had the ‘flu or other fever that increases the body temperature, this can damage sperm, resulting in a lower second reading. It is only recently that it has occurred to us that there may also be a seasonal effect.”

Dr Mathews provides reassurance that the problem is not severe, and that with modern treatment even men with naturally low sperm counts can go on to become fathers: “It is possible to extract viable sperm from even a very small sample and to inject the sperm directly into the egg, so we can still get good success rates.”

In issuing the advice Bourn Hall Clinic is seeking to maximise every couple's chance of success at conceiving. The testes hang low in hot weather to ensure that they are kept at a lower temperature than the body but avoiding tight-fitting clothing and hot baths are sensible precautions. However, many patients try and fit in a last holiday before IVF treatment starts to help relax and prepare for parenthood and it seems wise that they also avoid excessive sunbathing and hot tubs.

This anecdotal evidence is supported by recent research by University of Adelaide on the effects of heat on the testes of mammals. This confirmed that heat results in cell death in the testes and a consequent fall in sperm numbers in the semen. Additionally sperm exposed to heat have reduced ability to swim and may be less capable of fertilisation. The author, Brian Setchell, also concluded that although the effects are reversible, there may also be more long-term consequences than was originally thought.

Additionally, it has been known for many years that prolonged exposure of the testes to heat causes a decreased sperm count and that developing sperm are particularly susceptible. Indeed previous studies have been directed at the effectiveness of heat as a contraceptive, including the widely quoted works of Swiss doctor Martha Vogeli (1956), who claimed that regular hot sitz baths (hip baths) were a successful contraceptive and more recently by Dr R Mieuisset² that concluded that daily mild increase in temperature of 2⁰c is an effective contraceptive.

One of Bourn Hall Clinic's embryologists was amused to hear from an 80 year old that as a young man he had been advised to put ice in his pants to increase his sperm count. Times have moved on but with the hotter summers it is as well to take precautions!

- ENDS -

Notes for editors:

1 The effects of heat on the testes of mammals, B.P Setchell, Discipline of Anatomical Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia. Animal Reproduction, vol3 pp 81-91 2006

2 The potential of mild testicular heating as a safe, effective and reversible contraceptive method for men, Mieuxet R, Bujan L, Human Fertility Research Group, Universite Toulouse III In J Andrology 1994 Aug 17(4):186-91.

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About Bourn Hall Clinic:

Bourn Hall Clinic, is the world's first and best known assisted conception clinic, established in 1980 by Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards, the pioneers of IVF. Through innovative thinking the clinic maintains a leading role in the field.

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