

'OLDER MEN GROWING MUTATED SPERM'

'MALE FISH PRODUCING EGGS'

ARE WE FACING

THE INCONCEIVABLE TRUTH?



KATE FAITHFULL-WILLIAMS REPORTS



A BABY-MAKING ARMY OF WOMEN whose purpose is to fulfil the wishes of a middle-class elite could never move beyond the realms of a novel, right? Yet recent headlines have made *The Handmaid's Tale* – Margaret Atwood's vision of fertility as a rare commodity, to be controlled by the powerful – seem more prescient than ever. Chemists refusing to drop the price of emergency contraception, lest women use them irresponsibly. The NHS imposing a postcode lottery on IVF for the infertile. A sperm supply warped and drastically diminished by modern living. All of it hints at a future of fertility that looks every bit as dystopian as science fiction.

Of course, women have long been used to our fertility being the subject of national debate – ever since it stopped being the norm to have babies in our twenties. Until recently, the fact women were becoming mothers later in life was put down to the assumption we were delaying having babies in favour of concentrating on our careers. Research published last month showed that actually, many women in their thirties are freezing their eggs because they are a generation 'left over' thanks to a dearth of equally matched men. But while scientific advances have enhanced and extended women's fertility, it's now male fertility that's causing the scientific community concern. ▶

Flushed chemicals give fifth of male fish feminine traits

It has generally been believed that while women's fertility dwindles to just a 3% chance at the age of 45, men could become fathers at any age. Charlie Chaplin famously fathered a child at 73, while Pablo Picasso had his fourth baby when he was 68. But a new study has shown that sperm counts have fallen by 50% in the past 40 years and, contrary to previous assumptions, your partner's age is *just* as important as your own. Scientists from McGill University in Canada recently found mutations are creeping into sperm production over time, jeopardising couples' chances of having a healthy baby.

Fake news? Sadly not. The researchers studied women aged 40 to 46 undergoing IVF. In couples where the male was over 43 years old, no children were born. But older women with younger partners successfully had babies.

Meanwhile, further evidence our fertility is increasingly fragile comes from somewhere unexpected: new research reveals a significant rise in chemicals in our rivers that are feminising male fish. The study, led by University of Exeter bioscientist Professor Charles Tyler, found one in five male fish are exhibiting female characteristics, even producing eggs. Over 200 oestrogen-like chemicals have been identified in our waterways, with traces of contraceptive pills, plastics and antidepressants believed to be responsible for the new breed of transgender fish.

So should we be freaking out about mass infertility? 'Not at all,' assures NHS consultant Michael Dooley, a fellow of the Royal College of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians. He points to the fact that birth rates among women over 40 are actually rising, having trebled since 1981, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics. By contrast, women under 20 and between 20 and 24 are seeing the lowest birth rates since 1938.

Meanwhile, fertility expert Emma Cannon, who has helped thousands of couples have babies, says these two studies are 'a good thing. Anything that makes men consider their biological ability to procreate will have a positive impact. Fertility is often viewed exclusively as a women's issue'.

In fact, figures from the World Health

Organisation show that 40% of infertility is due to male factor, 40% is due to female factor, and 20% comes from complications affecting both partners.

'We'll increasingly see men freezing their sperm before they hit 30,' says Cannon, who is the author of *Fertile*. 'That said, there are scores of different lifestyle factors at play that are as important – if not more so – than age.'

So, is it time to reshuffle our priorities? Surely these lifestyle factors are only exacerbated by age? If we considered our fertility at 25 rather than 35, would we make it easier to overcome these external hurdles than when we've had 10 more years' exposure to things like alcohol, stress and harmful plastics? Unless it was supported by an increase of shared parental leave to ensure our careers aren't limited, this is unlikely to become the social norm.

In the meantime, to improve your fertility as a couple, regardless of your age, Dooley recommends eating an organic diet high in antioxidants, as these can protect against oxidative stress from air pollution and radiation. 'Vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, oily fish and grass-fed meats are all good. It is the food that your food eats which is important for your fertility – toxins concentrate further up the food chain.' It's a smart idea to avoid freshwater fish like roach, one of the feminised species identified in the University of Exeter Study. If you're worried about your water supply, Cannon advises swapping tap water for charcoal-filtered H₂O, or drinking still mineral water from glass bottles. Quit smoking, as the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) estimates cigarettes cause 13% of fertility problems. 'Alcohol also damages libido, sperm motility and morphology [shape; and thus ability to penetrate the egg wall],' adds Dooley. NICE recommends that men trying to conceive drink no more than four units per week.

Crucially, bearing in mind that stress is fertility's number one enemy, try not to worry about things you can't control. We're not hurtling towards a dystopian future. 'Your fertility is in your hands; there's a huge portfolio of baby-making options open to you if you want a family,' says Cannon. Blessed be the fruit. ■

IS HANDMAID'S TALE FERTILITY THE SIGN THAT WE NEED TO TRY EARLIER?

Asks *Grazia's* Emily Phillips, author of fertility comedy *Trying*



I'm 35 this year. According to all the fertility specialists – from acupuncturists to IVF consultants – I've seen in the last couple of months, I'm still on the young side of people they see walk into their clinics. But if most of the headlines are to be believed, my fertility is going to take a nosedive on my birthday in November.

And, although I know those headlines are alarmist, they're the reason I can't help wondering what it would have been like if I'd have tried for a baby when I was in my twenties. Would I still have had the unexplained infertility that I'm suffering now? Should I, as someone who has shades of polycystic ovaries, have seen it as my duty to get cracking on trying to start a family in advance of everyone else in my circle? I could have assumed that it would take into my thirties for it to actually happen anyway, but it would have been at the risk of having a baby while living in a mouldy house-share, robbing me of life-expanding experiences and not making enough money to tide myself – let alone a small person – over each month. And that's not even taking into account whether I'd have found myself a decent enough partner to make this decision with (I luckily had).

I have friends in their twenties who are facing just this conundrum. One has shaped her entire early career trajectory and future higher earning potential around the fact that she knows from her intermittent menstrual cycle that she might need to get a head start. She's stayed far too long with her Steady Eddie boyfriend because she's got the baby goggles on. At 23, who should be doing that at 23? You should be having fun, not tying yourself down, a slave to reproduction. There's plenty of time for staring at ovulation sticks when you're in your thirties. I can't help but feel like the more fulfilling your twenties and thirties are, the more likely you are to be a relaxed fertile person in later life. And even though my situation has been trying, I personally wouldn't have it any other way.

'Trying' is out 25 January (£12.99, Hodder & Stoughton)

Photos: Gary Bryson/Getty, Peter Zemanek

YOU THE FASHION JURY

OUR PANEL



LAURA ANTONIA JORDAN
Grazia's fashion news and features editor's go-tos are a great coat, socks-and-sandals and way too much black eyeliner.



HANNAH FLINT
Will I am once nicknamed junior news and entertainment editor Hannah 'Lil cheeks' on account of her phenomenal facial elasticity. Likes blue jeans.

AND YOU

GIVE US YOUR CHIC CRITIQUE EVERY MONDAY @GRAZIAUK ON INSTAGRAM



Thigh SPLITS, midriff FLASHES and DISCO trackies adorn the A-list



KARLIE KLOSS

LAURA SAYS:

Warm weather leather can be tricky (read: sticky) but Karlie shows you how to do it: opt for a breezy cut, bold shade and pair with a simple tee. I'd wear the slit even higher if I had her legs and I'm not even sorry for that.

★★★★☆

HANNAH SAYS:

Really like the idea that Karlie – the woman with probably the longest legs on the planet – has picked a skirt so high-waisted that it makes them look even longer. YES to the side slit, you tease.

★★★★☆

YOU SAY:

There's a thigh-high split then there's this skirt! Absolutely love a bit of coloured leather paired with a simple tee.

★★★★★

@MARIELOUISEOREILLY



OLIVIA PALERMO

LAURA SAYS:

Carrying off head-to-toe white in NYC sans stains says one thing: 'I have a driver.' Sweet, a bit snore, impeccable as always, but I bet even Olivia finds this a nightmare to go to the loo in.

★★★☆☆

HANNAH SAYS:

Turns out, looking at this sideways doesn't make this jumpsuit any less confusing. If it weren't for the lace cut-out, I'd be into it.

★★★★☆

YOU SAY:

OP's jumpsuit is growing on me. She looks quirky and comfy.

★★★★☆

@FLICKERINGEMBER