Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Grappling with Fertility Challenges

After years of preparation, the day that you finally start trying to have a family is monumental and exciting. But, unfortunately getting pregnant can be a real challenge for some. After months of trying, fertility problems can cause significant stress on a couple's emotional and physical lives. On the positive side, there may be a chance that something treatable is preventing you from conceiving.

There are many safe and effective treatments out there to help you overcome your fertility challenges and significantly improve your chances of getting pregnant. Also, if you plan on getting pregnant sometime in the near future, there are steps you can take to boost your fertility now.

Limit your Risk

Although many causes of infertility are beyond your control, there are lifestyle changes you can make to limit your risk of future problems. If you're planning for children in the near future, protect your fertility by:

- Avoiding tobacco and marijuana (which can reduce sperm count and female fertility).
- Steering clear of harmful chemicals.
- Limiting your alcohol consumption because it can be damaging to both women's eggs and men's sperm.
- Maintaining a healthy body weight.
- Limiting sexual partners and use condoms to reduce your risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) which can damage the reproductive system.

If you are trying to get pregnant, now more than ever, you need to stay active, eat a healthy, nutrient-rich diet, reduce caffeine intake and drink lots of water. You should avoid alcohol and all medicine and it's recommended that women trying to conceive start taking a daily vitamin with 400 mcg of folic acid. Just make sure you consult your doctor before making any changes to your lifestyle.

Treatment Choices

Typically, after a year of not being able to conceive, a couple is considered to be experiencing fertility problems. This timeline drops to six months if you have certain health conditions or are older than 35. Many couples can and do conceive after the first year without any medical help but you probably want to improve your chances of getting pregnant. The first step in finding a solution is to visit your doctor where you will be referred to a specialist.

Your treatment plan will depend on the cause, how long you've been experiencing problems, the ages of you and your partner as well as your own personal preferences. Of course, each of these therapies come with unique challenges and risks so you will need to go over all of your options with your doctor to figure out which one will work best for you. Treatment possibilities include but are not limited to:

Fertility drugs. These medications are used for woman experiencing ovulation disorders to regulate or induce ovulation. They are designed to work like natural hormones triggering regular ovulation. Also, if low sperm counts are suspected, men can use hormone therapy to boost these counts.

In vitro fertilization (IVF). During IVF eggs are taken from a woman, fertilized with a man's sperm in a laboratory and then implanted in the woman's uterus three to five days later. IVF also needs to be

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accompanied with frequent blood tests and daily hormone injections. This treatment is usually explored if both fallopian tubes are blocked or with conditions like endometriosis, undiagnosed infertility and ovulation disorders.

Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI). This microscopic technique is used to ensure fertilization during IVF by injecting a single sperm directly into the egg. ICSI is considered especially helpful for couples that have exhausted all traditional techniques and drastically improves the chance that your egg is fertilized.

Assisted hatching. In this treatment the embryo is implanted directly into the lining of the uterus.

Surgery. This option is used in men to unblock the reproductive tract, fix an enlarged vein in the scrotum or to remove sperm directly. For women, surgery can correct blockages or other issues in the fallopian tubes.

Recent studies have also revealed that acupuncture, relaxation techniques, dietary changes, supplements and natural medicines may also help your chances of getting pregnant while undergoing treatment. There are lots of alternative options out there, but just make sure you speak to a health professional before trying anything new.

Coping Together

A fertility problem can be one of the most difficult challenges you and your partner will ever face and can place significant strain on all aspects of your life. Not knowing how long it will take and having no control over the outcome can cause a lot of pain. To help you and your partner get through this difficult time you must:

Stay informed. Because fertility technologies and treatments are complicated and always evolving, you need to stay as educated and up-to-date as possible. This will help you understand your options and become a participant in your treatment plan so you can make informed decisions that are best for you.

Set limits. Infertility treatments are stressful and exhausting and can take a serious financial toll. Decide ahead of time what procedures you're willing to endure, how much you want to spend and a timeline for trying. Some couples become so focused on conceiving that they continue with treatments until they're completely drained—both emotionally and financially. No one can tell you when you should stop trying to get pregnant and you will have to make the decision with your doctor and partner. Deciding in advance just how far you're willing to go will help you feel more in control of the situation.

Consider your options. Although this is something that couples are often hesitant to do, you should explore other possibilities early on in the process. Look into adoption, sperm or egg donors and surrogacy. It may be a good idea to get on an adoption waiting list if this is something you're considering. Looking forward and doing everything you possibly can to have a family will reduce your anxiety during treatments and alleviate feelings of hopelessness.

Don't play the blame game. Resist the temptation to be angry with yourself for your difficulties. Many people can't help but think that they shouldn't have waited so long, should have taken better care of themselves or that they're being punished for past behavior. Many partners also experience relationship problems during this time by blaming each other. Work towards helping and supporting your partner instead of pointing fingers. Unite to find a solution. Even if you could have made different decisions in the past, they're behind you so focus on your future together.

Take care of you. When faced with fertility challenges you will probably find yourself focused on pregnancy 24 hours a day, seven days a week and it can start to feel like a full-time job. Look for ways to take care of yourself and your relationship. Take a class, pursue a hobby or get a massage. Organize a date night with your partner or a weekend getaway to get your mind off your treatment, even if it's for a little while.

Open up. Infertility can bring on frustration and grief and this isn't always recognized by society. It may be helpful to confide in someone who has gone through similar challenges. Join a support group or an online community. Consider talking to a therapist if you're feeling really low, but just make sure they have experience with reproductive counselling.

The pressure to have a family can be enormous and the idea that you may not be able to have children can feel overwhelming. There are many treatments out there today to help you reach your dreams of having a family. Stay positive, keep up-to-date on your options and remember to make your own physical and mental health a priority.