

UNEXPLAINED DOES NOT MEAN UNTREATABLE: A GUIDE FOR INFERTILITY PATIENTS

Imagine sitting in a doctor's office and hearing the words, "We can find nothing wrong." If the doctor was a cardiologist or oncologist you would probably go weak in the knees with giddy relief. But, if the doctor is a reproductive endocrinologist, and you are seeing him or her because of infertility, these words may bring you anything but relief. Instead, you are likely to feel confused, angry and frustrated, without a linear path towards your goal of having a healthy baby. Unfortunately, this scenario plays itself out in around 12% - 25% of all infertility related cases, and is called unexplained, or idiopathic, infertility.



When starting infertility treatment, your reproductive endocrinologist will perform a number of tests on both the male and female partners, if you are in a couple. These tests will include:

- Blood tests to determine hormone levels
- Routine screenings of both partners for sexually transmitted infections (STI's), HIV, and hepatitis
- Medical histories for both partners will be taken. Family histories will also be discussed, in order to determine if polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), premature ovarian failure (POF), endometriosis, celiac disease, varicocele, and other disorders are evident in either male or female family members.
- Charting of menstrual history
- Bacterial screening
- Ultrasound
- Hysterosalpingogram (HSG), which if suspicious, may be followed by a Hysteroscopy and/or Laparoscopy.
- Semen analysis (even if he's fathered a child before)

The challenge is this. Even with state of the art, current medical advancements, there is still much that is simply unknown about the causes of infertility. Subtle, biochemical or immune factors that can stop conception cold may not even show up through current testing protocols. In addition, multiple, simultaneous issues may be at play that individually, would not necessarily stop you from conceiving but when coupled together, lessen the chances that pregnancy will occur. Sometimes, a single, significant obstacle for which there is no accurate testing may be at fault. Simply put, some possible causes of infertility continue to baffle scientists and doctors alike, and may continue to remain, unexplained.

Unexplained and untreatable are not synonymous however. Women or couples who receive this diagnosis may go on to conceive and deliver a healthy baby at statistically the same rate that others within their own age range do.

For most people who present with unexplained infertility, the first course of treatment will most likely be geared towards boosting ovulation with medication and will probably be combined with Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) or In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), based on individual considerations such as maternal age. The goal here is simply to get the sperm closer to the egg in an attempt to have fertilization take place. During this time, many couples opt to continue to enjoy recreational sex at a rate of every other day up until a few days prior to ovulation taking place.

Over the past decade, infertility treatment has proven to be highly effective in cases of unexplained infertility and if this is your diagnosis, you should absolutely continue to hope for a positive outcome. However, it is understandable that the lack of a diagnosis may feel confusing, or even make you angry. If you find yourself needing additional support during this time, as many infertility patients do, make sure that you seek out either a support group or a counselor that may be able to supply both guidance and support. In addition, you may benefit from stress reduction techniques such as yoga, acupuncture, exercise or meditation.

It is understandable that this may be a difficult period of your life. People tend to do better with concrete explanations to problems and often take comfort from receiving answers. While you may never derive that kind of satisfaction about the cause of your infertility, if given the appropriate medical support, a pregnancy, and a healthy baby, may very well be the end result. And that is better than any scientific explanation could ever possibly be.

ENDNOTES

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