

ovacome..  
ovarian cancer

Living with ovarian cancer

# Ovarian cancer and fertility



**Ovacome is a national charity providing support and information to anyone affected by ovarian cancer.**

**We run a free telephone and email support line and work to raise awareness and give a voice to all those affected by ovarian cancer.**

**This booklet is part of our *Living with ovarian cancer* series.**

**It looks at the effect an ovarian cancer diagnosis and treatment may have on your fertility. It discusses fertility options and gives contact details for further information and support.**



**Ovarian cancer treatment is likely to affect your fertility. This can mean that you won't be able to get pregnant naturally, but there are choices available to you. It is very important for you to talk about your fertility needs with your clinical team before your treatment starts.**

## **Your treatment and fertility**

If you are diagnosed with early- stage ovarian cancer, or you have a germ cell tumour of the ovary, you may be offered fertility-sparing surgery (FSS). Early-stage ovarian cancer is usually termed stage 1 cancer which means the tumour is contained in one ovary.

Fertility conversations need to consider the tumour type and whether one or both ovaries are involved. Fertility sparing surgery is the removal of one ovary and fallopian tube. Keeping your remaining ovary, fallopian tube and your womb could preserve your fertility.

Fertility sparing surgery may not be possible if treatment needs to start immediately, if both ovaries are affected, the cancer is aggressive, or you have been diagnosed through emergency surgery. If you need chemotherapy, this can damage your remaining ovary or increase the risk of an earlier menopause.

See more information about ovarian cancer stages here:  
[www.ovacome.org.uk/stages-of-ovarian-cancer-booklet](http://www.ovacome.org.uk/stages-of-ovarian-cancer-booklet)

**A discussion with your clinical team about your fertility and treatment options should include:**

- Adjusting treatment to preserve fertility
- Assessing the likelihood of getting pregnant after treatment. This should include fertility risks such as your age, the treatments you are having including the dose and duration of your treatment
- Your options for fertility treatment
- If you are planning to use your partner's sperm, he will need to have fertility testing too
- Availability of fertility counselling
- The risks of delaying cancer treatment, to survival and recurrence

Your multidisciplinary team is likely to recommend that you wait up to two years after being treated for ovarian cancer, before trying to get pregnant. This lowers the risk of damage to the pregnancy caused by cancer treatment, and ovarian cancer recurrence is more likely within two years of treatment.

## Fertility options

If you have been diagnosed with ovarian cancer but would still like to get pregnant there are ways to preserve your fertility before you begin cancer treatment.

### Freezing your eggs

Freezing your eggs to store them for future use, before they are fertilised, may suit you if you don't have a partner and don't want to use donor sperm.

Your ovaries will be stimulated to produce multiple eggs. The eggs are retrieved from the follicles where they have matured and then frozen.

Side effects of the drugs used for ovarian stimulation can include bloating, nausea, abdominal pain, and diarrhoea. You may also experience menopause type symptoms such as hot flushes. You may need more than one cycle of stimulation and retrieval to get healthy eggs.

Chemotherapy treatment can reduce the number of eggs in your ovaries (low ovarian reserve). After your treatment you may be offered clomiphene, which acts to increase the production of natural hormones, or letrozole which reduces oestrogen levels to encourage the release of follicle-stimulating hormone and prompt ovulation.

### **In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF)**

This is the fertilisation of your eggs (which may have been collected before you had cancer treatment), or a donor's eggs, in a laboratory using sperm from your partner or a donor. If fertilisation is successful, one or two fertilised eggs will be placed in your womb. The eggs can also be frozen (cryopreservation) until you want to start a pregnancy.

IVF treatment can have complications including multiple pregnancy and ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS) which can cause your ovaries to swell and become painful.

There are more details about IVF on the NHS website here:  
[www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/ivf/](http://www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/ivf/)

## Fertility treatment costs

These procedures are complex and expensive. They may not always work.

In some areas, the NHS will cover the cost of some IVF. It may depend on what's available from your local integrated care board (ICB). You can find your local integrated care board (ICB) here:

[www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/find-your-local-integrated-care-board/](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/find-your-local-integrated-care-board/)

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) regulates and licenses fertility clinics. You can check individual clinics to find out:

[www.hfea.gov.uk](http://www.hfea.gov.uk)

- IVF techniques and how long these treatments may take
- How many babies have been born to the clinic's patients
- How to find a clinic and how much the treatment may cost

The NHS website advises asking private clinics: "for a personalised, fully costed treatment plan that explains exactly what's included, such as fees, scans and any necessary medicine." You can also ask about the length of their waiting list.

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/infertility/treatment/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/infertility/treatment/)

### Amy's story

*I first went to my GP with difficulties conceiving. I had fertility tests which showed nothing was wrong except I had an ovarian cyst. After a year of feeling tired and experiencing migraines, I went back to my GP. I was advised against preventative medication because we were trying for a baby. My dreams of starting a family began to fade.*

*By now I had abdominal pains and was referred to a gynaecologist who did a scan and saw the cyst. I had been referred for fertility investigations as I had unexplained infertility. I was diagnosed with stage 3 low grade ovarian cancer, two and a half years after I first went to my GP. I was 36.*

*Ovarian cancer has taken away my ability to have a family. This has been very difficult. Now my lifestyle has changed. I have started running again and passed my Masters in history which has given me focus.*

### More options

#### Donor eggs

If your ovaries don't produce healthy eggs but your womb is healthy enough for a pregnancy, you could consider using donor eggs or donor embryos.

Reputable agencies screen all donors for medical and genetic issues. Donor eggs are fertilised with sperm from your partner or another donor using IVF. Then one or more are placed in your womb. Hormone treatment may improve the chances of a successful pregnancy.

#### Donor embryos

Eggs from a donor are removed, fertilized with sperm in a lab to produce embryos which are then frozen. These can be put into your womb for you to carry the pregnancy. The child will not share your genes.

You may be able to get pregnant using these eggs or embryos by using IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) or with a surrogate mother.

## Surrogacy

Surrogacy is where another woman (the surrogate) carries the pregnancy for you.

Surrogacy uses the surrogate's egg with sperm from an intended parent using artificial insemination. Insemination can be done in a clinic or with a kit at home. The surrogate carries the child until it is born. The child will share the genes of one parent plus the surrogate. This is called traditional surrogacy.

Another form of surrogacy is gestational surrogacy (also called full or host surrogacy) which uses an embryo created by an egg and sperm from the intended parents or from donors. The surrogate has IVF and carries the pregnancy. This child will not share the genes of the surrogate.

The legality and costs of surrogacy are complicated. You can visit [www.surrogacyUK.org](http://www.surrogacyUK.org) for comprehensive and accurate information.

## Surrogacy and the law

Surrogacy is legal in the UK, but surrogacy agreements cannot be enforced by law. The law prohibits third parties arranging surrogacy for money and from advertising for surrogates. This means finding a surrogate can be difficult.

Find out more about the legal status of surrogacy here:  
[www.gov.uk/legal-rights-when-using-surrogates-and-donors](http://www.gov.uk/legal-rights-when-using-surrogates-and-donors)

## Adoption and fostering

A cancer diagnosis won't automatically disqualify someone from adopting or fostering children in the UK. Agencies will want to look at the potential impact of the diagnosis on your ability to care for a child throughout their dependant years.

Agencies will also want to consider your long-term health and prognosis, your need for medical care and your support network. They should assess each case individually.

They may seek medical information about you and examine the support available from partners, family and friends. You may be asked to wait a while after your treatment to assess your longer-term health. You can find out more about adoption from Coram BAAF Adoption & Fostering Academy [www.corambaaf.org.uk](http://www.corambaaf.org.uk) or your local authority.

## Your feelings about fertility

Before your ovarian cancer diagnosis, you may not have even thought about getting pregnant and starting a family. Yet the realisation that your cancer treatment could damage your fertility may cause you distress, grief and anger.

Talk about how you feel with your clinical team and your CNS (clinical nurse specialist). They should be able to put you in touch with a counsellor or therapist who can support you and help you to manage your feelings.

Talk to your partner and your family. Use the services listed below. They can help you to come to terms with the changes in your life.

## Further support and information

**Ovacome fertility webinar** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWd9MQ9r45U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWd9MQ9r45U)

**Ovacome adoption webinar** <https://youtu.be/IcUZTEBwuos>

**Cancer Fertility and Me** aims to help you think about the treatments which may help to preserve fertility and prepare for talks with healthcare professionals, partner, family and friends before cancer treatment starts: [cancerfertilityandme.org.uk/CFM-home](https://cancerfertilityandme.org.uk/CFM-home)

**The Fertility Alliance** is a national fertility charity offering support and accurate information for anyone who wants to know more about their fertility: [thefertilityalliance.org.uk/](https://thefertilityalliance.org.uk/)

**Fertility Network UK** is the UK's leading patient-focused, fertility support charity. They provide free and impartial help, support, advice and understanding for anyone affected by fertility issues.

[fertilitynetworkuk.org/](https://fertilitynetworkuk.org/) They have an online discussion forum here: [healthunlocked.com/fertility-network-uk](https://healthunlocked.com/fertility-network-uk)

**Daisy Network** provides support to women, along with their families and partners, who have been diagnosed with premature ovarian insufficiency: [www.daisynetwork.org/](https://www.daisynetwork.org/)

**British Infertility Counselling Association (BICA)** is the professional association for infertility counsellors and counselling in the UK and can help find a counsellor near you: [www.bica.net](https://www.bica.net)

**Adoption UK** support and connect adopted people, adoptive parents, prospective adopters and the community around children who cannot live with their birth parents: [www.adoptionuk.org/](https://www.adoptionuk.org/)

**The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority** is the UK's independent regulator licensing fertility clinics and centres carrying out in vitro fertilisation (IVF). It provides information and advice on IVF: [www.hfea.gov.uk](http://www.hfea.gov.uk)

**SurrogacyUK** is the UK's leading not-for-profit surrogacy organisation: [www.surrogacyUK.org](http://www.surrogacyUK.org)

**The Fertility Foundation** provides grants for IVF treatment: [fertilityfoundation.org](http://fertilityfoundation.org)

**Fertility Friends** online forum: [www.fertilityfriends.co.uk/](http://www.fertilityfriends.co.uk/)

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We welcome your feedback on this booklet. Please email [ovacome@ovacome.org.uk](mailto:ovacome@ovacome.org.uk) or call 0800 008 7054. If you would like to discuss anything about ovarian cancer, please phone our support line on 0800 008 7054 Monday to Friday between 10am and 5pm. You can also visit our website at [www.ovacome.org.uk](http://www.ovacome.org.uk). This is one of a series of information booklets produced by Ovacome. You can see them here: [ovacome.org.uk/information](http://ovacome.org.uk/information)

## Disclaimer

Ovacome booklets provide information and support. We make every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information at the time of publication. The information we give is not a substitute for professional medical care. If you suspect you have cancer, you should consult your doctor as quickly as possible. Ovacome cannot accept any liability for any inaccuracy in linked sources.

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