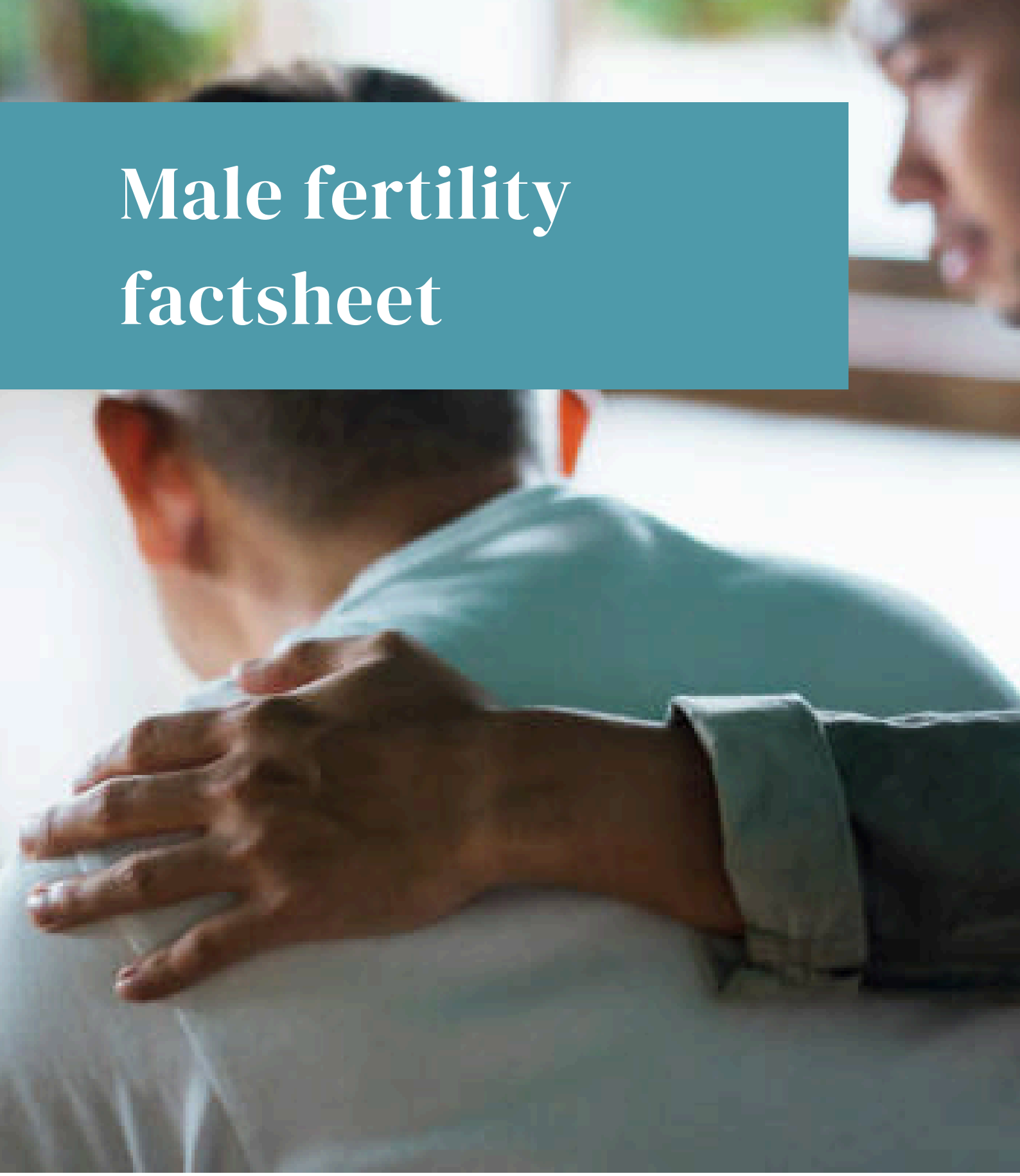
Male fertility factsheet



FERTILITY IN THE WORKPLACE
Expert workplace support from The IVFN

THE IVFN
Reproductive health & wellbeing for everybody

Men and Fertility

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Fertility problems are often assumed to be a female issue. However, evidence shows that almost half of the cases of infertility are related to fertility issues with the male partner and the rate of male infertility is reported to be increasing.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines infertility as a disease of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse (WHO, Infertility, September 2020).

Infertility can be due to female only factors, male only factors, or a combination of male and female factors. About a third of infertility cases are defined as unexplained.

Although often seen as a women's health issue, the reality is that both men and women are just as likely to face fertility problems. Data from the fertility regulator, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, shows that male infertility is the most common reason for a couple to start treatment.

Fertility issues are complex. It can impact you in several ways:

- physically because of the impact of treatment,
- mentally because of the emotional distress of infertility and its treatment,
- financially because most people in the UK have to self-fund treatment and
- socially because infertility can be isolating, with a deep impact on relationships.

Your fertility journey and the issues you and your partner encounter may vary considerably from diagnosis, through to treatment and beyond, if treatment is not successful and other pathways to parenthood are explored.

Fertility issues are much more common than we may assume and can affect a higher proportion of people than previously acknowledged.

Fertility treatment can leave men feeling excluded as treatment tends to focus on treatment of the female partner even when the infertility is male related. There tends to be less support available for male partners although this is changing.

Causes of male infertility

Male fertility problems are most often to do with the number or quality of sperm or with problems in the tubes which carry the sperm. Sometimes the number of sperm may be lower than usual (that's the sperm count), or the shape or structure of the sperm may be a problem (sperm morphology), or they may not be able to swim about normally (sperm motility). Any of these can lead to difficulty conceiving.

There is growing evidence that there is an age-related decline in male fertility. It is not as marked as the female biological clock but there is a decline in sperm quality as men get older and it is thought that this may make miscarriage more likely.

Poor Sperm Quality
This is the most common cause of male infertility. There are some reasons for this: low sperm count or no sperm at all, sperm that do not move properly, abnormally shaped sperm. Some men's sperm appear normal but are damaged at a genetic level.

Infections
Infections that occur in the genital or urinary tract can cause infertility. Sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia can block men's tubes and can affect sperm production permanently. Having mumps after puberty can cause inflammation of the testes and may make men sterile.

Testicles
Damage to the testicles can impact sperm production as these are where sperm is produced and stored. Damage can be due to testicular cancer, surgery, infection, or injury. It can also be due to a congenital defect or undescended testicles.

Varicose veins in the testicles, known as varicocele, can also result in infertility. Heat can also impact on sperm quality and so things like cycling, working at high temperatures, hot baths and using laptops can cause sperm quality to decrease.

Sterilisation
Sterilisation in men is called a vasectomy and is requested by men who do not wish to have any more children or who do not want children. This procedure involves the tubes from the testes being cut or tied so that sperm cannot reach the semen. This procedure can be reversed but it is not always successful.

Medicines & Drugs
Taking some medications can impact male fertility as they affect sperm quality. The following medications are associated with male infertility: antidepressants (SSRI inhibitors), chemotherapy, sulfasalazine, certain herbal remedies, and anabolic steroids. Illegal drugs such as cannabis can also impact sperm quality.

Anabolic Steroids
Long term use of anabolic steroids can result in male infertility as they cause the testicles to shrink and sperm production to stop. It can take up to two years for sperm production to return to normal. However, the effects are not always reversible.

Ejaculation Disorders
Men can experience ejaculation problems during sex which makes it difficult to release semen.

Hormones
Low testosterone levels can cause male infertility as testosterone is needed for sperm production. This condition is known as hypogonadism.

Smoking
Smoking can impact sperm quality due to genetic damage and result in male infertility.

Poor Diet
There is evidence that poor diet impacts health in general and is linked to male infertility. Eating a healthy Mediterranean diet which is balanced will help improve fertility.

Systemic Illness
Some medical conditions or illnesses can result in poor sperm quality e.g., diabetes, liver disease and kidney failure.

Alcohol
Binge drinking and drinking more than recommended alcohol units per week can reduce the quality of sperm.

Caffeine
There is evidence that consuming too much caffeine can impact the quality of sperm.

Weight
Being overweight or underweight can impact male fertility. NHS guidelines suggest that having a BMI between 20 – 25 is healthy. Mild to moderate exercise and eating a healthy diet can help maintain a BMI of 20 – 25.

Depression & Stress
Depression can affect male fertility as it can reduce sex drive and lead to erectile dysfunction and ejaculation problems. Medication for depression can also impact male fertility. Stress can impact hormones involved in sperm products and so impact sperm quality.

Age
Age can be a factor in male infertility. Male fertility reduces with age. Male fertility starts to decline in the forties.

What can I do to make a difference?

Tight underwear
Research has shown that men who wear boxer shorts tend to have better sperm than men who wear tight pants, which can cause the testicles and scrotum to get too hot and this can damage sperm. The impact of tight underwear can be reversed if you change what you wear.

Heat
Men whose work involves sitting still for long periods, like drivers, or those who work near heat sources, like chefs or steel workers, may find that this affects their sperm. Getting up and moving about or taking time away from the heat source will help.

Smoking
Smoking can damage the quality of your sperm and cause genetic damage. Passive smoking can also affect your partner's fertility, so it is important to give up if you are trying to conceive.

Alcohol
Drinking too much alcohol or binge drinking can reduce the quality of your sperm.

Medication and drugs
Some medications and drugs are associated with male fertility problems. Anabolic steroids can have a serious impact, and sperm production may even stop altogether. Illegal drugs can also lead to male fertility issues.

Nutrition
A healthy diet rich in vitamins and minerals can make a difference to sperm production. Maintaining a healthy weight is important too, as being very overweight can have a negative impact on your health and fertility.

How does it impact mental health?



Mental health can be impacted in a variety of ways, and this depends on the unique journey faced by each person. For some people, there may be a sense of excitement in starting treatment and accessing help, but for many there can be huge implications.

A study carried out (by Fertility Network UK and Middlesex University) found that as a result of fertility problems and/or treatment:

- **83% of respondents felt sad, frustrated, and worried often or all the time**
- **47% experienced feelings of depression often or all the time**
- **40% experienced suicidal feelings**

We know this impact on mental health can then take its toll on a person's work, as well as socially. The results of this survey show that you are not alone if you feel that fertility issues are impacting your mental health and wellbeing.

The emotional impact of infertility can be overwhelming. Feelings of sadness, frustration, isolation, tearfulness, inadequacy, guilt, and anger are all common. It is important that you find ways to look after yourself and find support for others that you trust.



Good to know

- Fertility issues affect both men and women from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.
- For many people, fertility issues are one of the biggest life events they will face.

Working during fertility treatment

It is important to consider whether to tell your employer that you are having fertility treatment. You will probably need to take time off for appointments throughout your treatment.

There is no automatic legal right to time off for fertility treatment. However, medical appointments related to fertility treatment should be treated in the same way as any other medical appointment under your employer's policy. You may want to check your contract or staff handbook to see what you are entitled to as an employee. If you can discuss your treatment with your employer, they may consider flexible working, paid time off or unpaid time off. The amount of time people need off varies considerably depending on the treatment, the number of appointments required and how far you are from the clinic. Talk to your clinic beforehand about how many appointments you will have and how much time it is likely to take.

Many employers now have fertility policies to support staff who need time off. It would be worthwhile enquiring if your workplace has a fertility policy. The Equality and Human Rights Commission Code recommend that employers treat time off for IVF treatment sympathetically. If your employer refuses time off for treatment, you may be able to bring an Employment Tribunal claim for indirect sex discrimination.

Deciding whether to tell your employer is an individual decision and it may depend on your circumstances. Fertility treatment can feel very personal, but there can be advantages to telling your employer if you can. It is important to be aware that if you end up taking a lot of time off at short notice which is unexplained, it is possible this could trigger a disciplinary process.

Some people find they need to take sick leave when they are going through fertility treatment particularly if they need time to recover from the effects of medical procedures and drug treatment. Your GP would be able to sign you off sick, and this should be dealt with by your employer in the same way as any other sick leave. Sick absence related to fertility treatment will be covered by your employer's sickness absence scheme.

Getting the right support

Fertility clinics offering IVF/ICSI treatment will be able to refer you to a counsellor if you would like counselling support. Going for counselling is not a sign that you are not coping but shows that you are dealing with the problems raised by fertility problems and treatment.

Talking to people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling can be helpful. It is important not to isolate yourself from friends and family. This may be difficult but explaining to others about what you are experiencing may help them to understand what you are facing and encourage them to find ways to support you.

Communicating with your partner is also extremely important. Finding ways to discuss what you are both going through will help and spending time together doing things you enjoy is important.

The IVFN provides trusted information and expert support across male fertility and reproductive health, with access to educational resources, a supportive community and fertility specialists through the IVFN platform.