

Sperm freezing and storage for fertility preservation

Information for trans and non-binary people

This leaflet gives you more information about options for preserving (saving/or protecting) your fertility. You may be considering starting treatments as part of your gender affirming care that may affect your fertility. You may not have thought about whether you want to have children in the future but it is important to think about things now so you can make the right decision for you.

Why might I need to preserve my fertility?

Some of the medications that you may be considering for your gender care could affect your fertility. The best time to store sperm would be before starting any gender affirming treatment but it may be possible to do this after you have started treatment.

GnRH Agonists (blocker injections) are very effective at blocking/stopping the production of testosterone by stopping the release of some hormones from your brain. Blocking these hormones is likely to stop the production of sperm in the testicles. This effect is likely to be reversible (when stopping blockers) but could be irreversible (sperm production never recovers). However, it may take a long time off blockers (months or even years) for sperm production to restart. If blockers were started prior to puberty, sperm production will likely have never started. In this case, it could take a very long time for sperm production to begin, and your body would go through puberty.

Oestrogen (female hormone replacement) is likely to stop or reduce sperm production. This effect may be reversible (with stopping oestrogen) or permanent (sperm production never returns). The longer you are on treatment the more likely the effect will be permanent. Stopping oestrogen may allow sperm production to recover but this could take a long time (months or years).

Tucking (pushing the testicles back inside the body) can stop sperm production by heating the testicles. This is because sperm production needs a lower body temperature.

How can I preserve my fertility?

Sperm can be collected and frozen (cryopreserved) for future use. To collect a sample of sperm you need to be able to masturbate and ejaculate into a pot. This needs to be done in a private room in the fertility department at the hospital to ensure that the sample can be frozen as soon as possible. Before freezing, the sperm sample is usually divided between several 'straws'. This means that the whole sperm sample does not need to be thawed at once and can be used in multiple treatments.

The testicles need to be big enough to be able to produce a sample. If blockers were started in early puberty when the size of the testicles was small, then treatment would need to stop to allow pubertal development and growth of the testicles.

Who is eligible for sperm storage?

You need to be referred by your endocrine (hormone) doctor with the support of the gender identity clinic. As part of this referral they will have assessed your eligibility for NHS funded storage of sperm. If you do not meet the eligibility criteria you can pay to store your sperm, but this would need to be at another fertility centre.

Counselling

The first appointment you receive will be with our counsellor. They will talk to you about your options and explore your thoughts and feelings around freezing your sperm. It is also a chance to ask any questions you might have. Counselling is not part of an assessment process and will not affect your treatment in any way. You can have more appointments if you need more support before, during or after your treatment.

What to expect at your clinic visit

You will then meet with a fertility specialist to discuss the process and explain the consent forms. You need to be able to understand and sign these consent forms yourself. You will need to have a sample of blood taken to check for infections. Once these results are back you will be given a date and time to come and produce your sample.

What happens after I have produced my sperm sample?

You will receive a call to tell you about the quality of the sperm and whether it is suitable to freeze.

How long can sperm be stored?

You can store your sperm for up to 55 years, but you must confirm consent every 10 years. So it is important that you let us know if your contact details change (address and telephone number). If we cannot re-confirm consent at the 10-year points, we must dispose of your sperm.

Using your sperm in the future?

You may wish to use your sperm for treatment in the future. At this time, your GP would refer you to the fertility clinic. There are different criteria (rules) for using your sperm for treatment and these could change over time. The type of treatment available may depend on the quality of your stored sperm.

What other options do I have?

You may decide not to store your sperm. If you decide you want children in the future you may be able to use sperm donated from another person or consider adopting or fostering a child. Or you may decide you do not want to have children at all.

Confidentiality

Appointments are confidential meaning anything you have discussed or are worried about will be private; staff will not share this with anyone (including your parents) unless you give permission. You may be feeling quite overwhelmed now and may find it helpful to talk things over with a family member or a close friend.