

Egg freezing—the reality of putting your fertility on ice

August 8 2018, by Kylie Baldwin



Egg freezing: hope or hype? Credit: shutterstock

When people think of women freezing their eggs, it's often seen as something to do if you want to get ahead in your career – a way of delaying motherhood. Some companies have even [offered funding for](#)

[the procedure for their female staff.](#)

Egg freezing allows women not yet ready for motherhood, to undergo a procedure to remove and freeze a number of healthy eggs for potential future use. Supporters of this [technology point to data](#) which show how higher [egg freezing](#) survival rates, as well as pregnancy rates can be achieved using a new egg freezing technique. This is called [vitrification](#), and it has the potential to rival the success rates observed when using fresh eggs.

But caution has been called for over so-called "social egg freezing", by the [Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists](#). In its [latest report](#), it noted that while this technology has the potential to offer some women the possibility of delaying motherhood until later in life, the procedure does not guarantee a future [live birth](#), carries risk, and can be very expensive.

The women who freeze

Despite the stereotype of the cut throat career woman putting off motherhood for the sake of her job, my research has actually found that many women who choose to use this technology have had difficulties in finding the right partner.

In some cases, women have come out of long-term relationships, which they thought would lead to motherhood, in their thirties. And they are now faced with the possibility of not finding the right partner before the end of their fertile years.

As well as a sense of running out of time to find a partner, women are also often motivated to freeze their eggs by a desire to avoid feelings of regret and blame should they one day experience involuntary childlessness. My research shows, for some women, there is also a desire

to prevent themselves from entering in to unwise relationships to have a child – what I have termed "panic partnering".

Lack of information

Due to the relative novelty of the technology, data on the success rates of egg freezing is not yet available – unlike fresh IVF cycles. So potential users must rely on their clinic to provide them with information about how effective the technology is likely to be.

And unfortunately, my research interviewing women who have undergone this procedure, as well as speaking to clinics providing this technology, found that it was not uncommon for women to be provided with poor quality information – specifically, about their likelihood of achieving a live birth with their frozen eggs.

My research indicated that women were sometimes provided an estimate of egg freezing success based on data that was unlikely to be comparable, such as the success rates published by centres outside of the UK, where eggs are taken from much younger women than the average user of egg freezing.

To ensure that egg freezing is not oversold as a way to "stop the biological clock", women must be given as much individualised information as possible or at the very least be informed of the limitations of current evidence.

Shame and stigma

So, the recommendations in the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists report, that women should be provided age-specific success rates by a clinic that has plenty of experience with frozen eggs, are to be welcomed.

But what this report – as well as much of the other research on egg freezing – has not yet recognised is how the needs of these fertility patients differ to women who are undergoing IVF to try and conceive. Women freezing their eggs are more likely to be doing so without both the practical, or emotional, support of a partner.

Egg freezing can be a highly distressing and emotional experience. Many women report a sense of loneliness, isolation, and stigma associated with their lack of a partner and their "need" to freeze eggs for the future. And in my research, many women said they would appreciate greater sensitivity and understanding from clinic staff about the reasons why they sought to freeze their [eggs](#).

Control the future

So while it's clear that egg freezing has the potential to offer a future family to some women, this should not detract from the social, economic and political issues that contribute to women's use of this technology in the first place. This includes discriminatory employment practices, inadequate provision of childcare and men's attitudes towards fatherhood.

The provision of high quality sex and relationship education as well as clear information about the realities of egg freezing are therefore crucial to try and ensure [women](#) and couples are able to attempt parenthood at a time best suited to themselves.

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