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ask the sexpert

How do fertility drugs work, and why do they cause multiple births?

Fertility drugs are basically ovulation-inducing drugs. They cause a woman's ovaries to ripen and release an egg when her body is not ovulating on its own. Although there are a number of other causes of infertility, about 15 percent of the couples who seek help find they are unable to have a baby because the woman is not ovulating.

One type of fertility drug, chlomid, acts on the pituitary

gland to stimulate the production of two hormones necessary for ovulation. Pergonal, another drug used, acts directly on the ovaries to ripen and release the egg. Pergonal is not usually prescribed unless chlomid has been tried first.

Both drugs may "over-correct" and cause the ovaries to release two or more eggs at the same time. When these eggs are fertilized, this can result in multiple births. Studies show there is about a 20 percent increase of twinning and tripling in women who have used chlomid.

The occurrence of multiple births of four or more are usually associated with pergonal.

If a woman has an abortion, will it increase the risk of problems with future pregnancies?

Since 1975 several studies have been conducted to determine the possible effects of legal abortion on subsequent pregnancies. Some studies indicate no problem with future pregnancies and some show an increase in miscarriage and premature delivery.

Two factors — the type of abortion performed and whether or not the woman has had prior abortions — seem to explain much of the discrepancy in findings. The risk of miscarriage or prematurity is directly related to the frequency and degree to which the canal to the uterus (cervix) is dilated.

Pregnancy itself is a state in which the cervix becomes dilated. It is important to realize that even after a full-term pregnancy, the chance of miscarriage increases slightly. Cervical dilation is induced in abortion procedures, but the degree of dilation varies with the procedure.

There are various legal methods used to terminate pregnancy. In this community the primary method used for a first trimester abortion is vacuum suction. This procedure involves only slight dilation of the cervix, and studies indicate no detrimental effects on future pregnancies if a woman only has one abortion.

In some instances, a dilation and curettage is performed. The degree of cervical dilation may be greater with this method, and studies have implicated the technique in reduced birth rate, prematurity and miscarriage in subsequent pregnancies.

The picture may change with repeat abortions. A recent study in Boston supported findings indicating that the risk of first trimester miscarriage increases two to three times in women who have had two or more prior induced abortions.

In summary, studies regarding the safety of legal abortion seem to suggest that a single vacuum suction abortion is a safe medical procedure, and it has no detrimental effects on future pregnancies or deliveries. But repeat abortions or other abortion procedures may involve some future risk.

This column is written by Planned Parenthood, 134 E. 13th Ave. Please send questions to EMU 300 or to Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood is a private, non-profit United Way agency providing comprehensive family planning services, pregnancy testing, education, information and referral.

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