

Fecundity and the age of the woman

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Fecundity, the capacity to bear a child, declines markedly with female age. The fundamental aspect of reproductive senescence in women is a decrease in the quantity and quality of ovarian follicles. This appears to be inevitable and irreversible, with no evidence that the process can be slowed in individual women. Furthermore there is clearly a difference in the threshold number of follicles required to maintain cyclicity, with an average period of 10 years between loss of fertility and complete cessation of ovarian function. Other factors contributing to a loss of fecundity are much less important, for example ageing of the reproductive tract, in particular the uterus. However the frequency of intercourse may be contributory, and male age is relevant over 40 years. In clinical terms the difficulty is that there is no external sign or marker of reduced or absent fecundity, although response to ovarian stimulation has some prognostic significance.