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Want to become a father? Your clock is ticking too
Study shows higher risk of sperm-cell damage in men 35 and older

New York, NY January 13, 2003 - With a microscope trained on human sperm, doctors can now see physical evidence of a male biological clock. Researchers recently reported that in the sperm cells of men over 35, more double-helix strands of DNA are torn straight through, and the programmed flushing of damaged cells, known as apoptosis, has slowed. **According to Dr. Philip Werthman, male reproductive specialist from the Center for Male Reproductive Medicine in Los Angeles, "This shows that men over age 35 may have increased amounts of sperm DNA damage.** Although women have long been warned about the effects of late childbearing on their fertility and their child's health, declining sperm quality in older men remains a cloudy, submerged danger.

Studies exist linking older fathers to diseases such as schizophrenia and some kinds of cancer in their offspring. But new research is presenting a clearer view into the microbiology of the aging process. Observing 60 sperm samples from men ranging in age from 22 to 60, researchers found older men showed more DNA breakage and less apoptosis, meaning that damage accumulates as they age. Werthman says, "it is obvious that an increased risk of infertility and birth defects with advanced maternal age are clearly well known but decreased sperm quality can occur with advanced paternal age."

"Some studies have shown an increased risk of congenital or genetic abnormalities in offspring of fathers over age 50 but other studies have failed to confirm these findings," says Werthman. But as Americans reproduce at an older age, they hope men will begin to acknowledge that they, too, are taking risks by waiting. As women age, they face a sobering raft of statistics and a clear message from the medical community: This year, the ASRM, the nation's largest group of fertility specialists, distributed posters that featured an upside-down baby bottle shaped like an hourglass. Newborn baby girls have several hundred thousand eggs, but the supply and quality of eggs have declined by age 40, and specialists can put exact odds on the risk of a chromosomal abnormality.

"There is a deep-running resistance to shifting the burden for genetic disease to men." Werthman states, "The bottom line is that it may get slightly harder to father a child as a man enters his 40's or later but the risks for the general population are small and certainly not finite as they are in women so there's not much cause for alarm but men should be informed of this phenomenon."

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