

Guidance Notes for Potential Sperm Donors

Firstly we would like to thank you for your interest in becoming a sperm donor. There is nothing as precious as the gift of life and by becoming a sperm donor you will be helping people to create the family they otherwise could not have.

Below is some general information to help you. We hope that you will contact us if there is anything further we can do. We can put you in touch with others who have donated, for example, so you can speak to them about their experience.

The information should be read in conjunction with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority leaflet "Donating Sperm, Eggs and Embryos". The HFEA can also be contacted on 0207 291 8200. www.hfea.gov.uk for further information.

Why are Sperm Donors needed?

The process of having children is often taken for granted, with most people not thinking about infertility until they are unable to have children. This realisation can have far reaching implications for many people. However, one in seven couples seek medical advice at some stage in their lives in order to achieve a pregnancy. In approximately 30% of cases, the infertility is due to an abnormality in the man's sperm, or poor or no sperm production (sterility). One method of achieving a pregnancy for such couples is to use donated semen in a procedure known as Donor Insemination (DI). For this to be possible it is necessary to have a supply of (donated) viable sperm. This is provided by men who agree to become sperm donors.

Would you make a suitable donor?

To be a sperm donor you should be aged between 18 and 45 years old and free of serious medical disability and without a family history of inherited disorder(s). You should be able to commit some time each week over a period of three to six months whilst you are taking part in the programme. Moreover, you should be willing to keep in contact with the centre for up to one year if you are accepted.

Who cannot be donors?

There are a number of reasons why a man cannot be accepted as a sperm donor. This is to minimise the risks of transmitting infection to those women inseminated with the donated sperm and to minimise the risk of transmitted common genetic diseases or malformations to any children born. Reasons for being unable to accept a man as a sperm donor include:

Age: Because there is evidence to suggest that genetic abnormalities are more common with older fathers, men who are 45 or older cannot be accepted as sperm donors. Although the risk is relatively small, the current thinking is that it is too great for those undergoing DI treatment and any children born from donated sperm.

Adoption: People who are adopted can donate only if there is availability of a family medical history. It is necessary to examine their family history for evidence of serious inherited disorders that could be passed on to any children born following DI.

Promiscuity: Anyone who is sexually promiscuous is of increased risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection. Although each accepted donor is screened at the beginning and the end of the donation process, few clinics would risk taking on as a donor someone who may subsequently acquire an infection.

Drugs: Certain medicines as well as recreational drugs can affect the production of sperm or in some cases damage sperm. Moreover, the use of some recreational drugs can lead to sexual promiscuity and the risks that this carries (outlined above).

Heritable conditions: Because some birth defects (e.g. spina bifida, cleft palate, hare lip) and serious diseases (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, schizophrenia, asthma and haemophilia) are genetically linked, it is not possible to accept as a donor any individual where there is a family history of these conditions.

Time: Becoming a sperm donor involves a regular commitment over several months, as well as being able to keep in touch with the centre for about one year; a clinic would not normally be able to accept as a donor anyone who cannot make this commitment.

Previous donations: Because the number of children that can be born following the use of a donor's sperm is regulated by law, a centre would not accept as a donor an individual who has previously donated at another centre.

What next?

If you still wish to be considered as a sperm donor and you are not specifically excluded by any of the criteria mentioned above, then your next step would be to contact a licensed centre. Details of centres who are currently recruiting sperm donors are enclosed. This lists the contact telephone number and in some cases the name of a specific co-ordinator you should ask to speak to. Also shown are the specific opening hours of the centres and you should contact the centre during those times.

The response you will receive to your approach will differ from centre to centre as determined by their particular working practices. For example, some centres will conduct an initial discussion with you over the telephone whereas others may invite you in to speak face to face with a member of staff. In either case, the centre's staff will need to assess your suitability as a sperm donor and they will ask questions about the health of you and your wider family. If there are no obvious reasons to exclude you as a sperm donor then the next stage will be to:

- produce a semen sample that can be examined in the laboratory. You will usually need to abstain from any form of sexual activity for between 3 and 5 days prior to producing the sample. Moreover, you will usually need to produce this sample in a private room in the centre. This is so the sample can be analysed as soon as possible after it is produced.

- a sample of your blood will be taken for analysis. This will include tests to determine your blood group as well as screen for common genetic diseases and sexually transmitted infections. You may also need to be examined by a doctor who will take swabs and may also require a sample of urine. You will also be asked to sign a form giving your permission for the centre to contact your general practitioner and ask for their opinion as to your suitability as a donor.
- You will have an interview with a member of staff to discuss the donation process and explain the legal aspects that surround it. This will include a discussion concerning your rights and the rights of those receiving your sperm and of any child born as a result of DI treatment.

When you visit the licensed centre, you will be asked questions about your health and related issues mentioned above. You will be offered counselling about what is involved and your rights, as well as the rights of those receiving your donated sperm and any child created by means of your donated sperm.

Each centre may differ in their approach to conducting donor assessment which may take place over several weeks to allow you time to reflect and consider the commitment you are making. Throughout this process you will be given the opportunity to speak to a counsellor and discuss any issues that are of concern to you. You are free to withdraw from the process at any point and if you are in any doubts about becoming a donor then you should feel free to voice your concerns. Centres will normally have an independent counsellor on hand that you may see at any time and it is important that you are aware of this. The counsellor will be able to answer any concerns that you may be having and will help you in reaching a decision that is right for you.

If you are not accepted as a semen donor then you should be given a full explanation as to the reasons for this. The common reasons for not being able to accept a donor at this stage are:

- *Sub-optimal semen quality:* Only men who have higher than average semen quality are normally accepted as a donor. This is to ensure the recipients of these samples have the highest possible chances of conceiving following their treatment. If your semen is sub-optimal, then it is unlikely that you will be accepted as a donor. If there are any implications for your own fertility then the clinic will explain these to you.
- *Poor freeze/thaw results:* For reasons that are not fully understood, only sperm from some men are able to survive the process of freezing and thawing that is required for samples to be used in DI treatments. If sufficient numbers of your sperm cannot survive the freezing and thawing process then you will not be accepted as a donor.

- *Chromosomal abnormalities:* One of the blood tests will be used to examine your chromosomes in a test called a karyotype. Some healthy men are found to have minor problems with the structure of their chromosomes, which may cause no problem to themselves but may have unexpected effects in their children. Such men cannot be accepted as donors and will be offered counselling to explain any implications for their own family.
- *Genetically linked diseases and conditions:* During the clinic's evaluation of your family history or during the various blood tests, it is possible that something may be discovered that will not allow you to become a donor. An example of this is you may be found to be a carrier for cystic fibrosis. This affects 1 in 25 of the adult population and carriers are unable to be donors. In such cases, the clinic will offer advice as to what this may mean for your own family.
- *Sexually acquired infections:* Whilst some sexually transmitted infections are treatable, others (e.g. genital warts or herpes) can only be managed. Therefore, if during your assessment you are found to have one of these conditions, the clinic will not be able to accept you. They will, however, advise you about what this diagnosis may mean for your own sexual health.

If you are accepted as a sperm donor and you agree to enter the programme then you will need to sign legal forms giving your consent to the storage of your samples and allow their use in treating other people. The samples you donate will be kept in storage for up to ten years, but you may specify a shorter time if you wish. In addition, notes will be made about your physical appearance (e.g. build, complexion, eye and hair colour) and these details may be used to match your characteristics with those of the recipients of your donated sperm.

You need also to be aware that your details will be held on a register maintained by the HFEA as a safeguard against inappropriate sexual relationships between children sharing the same (genetic) father.

The law changed on the 1st of April 2005 to remove anonymity from donors and allow donor-conceived children to access the identity of their donor when they reach the age of 18. The new legislation will not be retrospective.

The donation process: During the period of time that you are producing the semen samples that are frozen, you would normally be expected to attend the centre once or twice a week to produce a sample for freezing. Most centres are quite flexible about this and do not require you to keep specific appointments. However, it is important that the period of time that you are donating is kept to a minimum to reduce the possibility of catching any infections that could ultimately lead to your samples being unusable. Some centres may ask that if you are sexually active you consider using a condom with your partner to reduce this risk to a minimum. Ordinarily, you should expect to donate regularly for a period of three to four months, although this time may vary according to the quality of your samples and the requirements of the clinic.

After the donation: Once enough samples have been obtained, then you will need to have further medical tests to make sure that you are still clear of any infections that could be transmitted in your frozen semen. In addition, you will be asked to return to the clinic six months after the date of your last donation and have a blood sample taken. This will be tested for Hepatitis and HIV and, if negative, will allow your samples to be 'cleared' and used in DI. If for any reason you are tested positive for HIV or Hepatitis then your samples will be destroyed. However, the clinic will make sure you are referred to a doctor who can take care of you at this time and receive appropriate medical advice and treatment.