

# Too Old to Be a Dad?

**If you're not worried about your biological clock, maybe you should be.**

By Maggie Koerth-Baker for MSN Health & Fitness

You're getting older; have you thought about fertility lately? Chances are, if you're like most guys, the answer's, um, nope.

"I think most men understand that they'll be making sperm throughout their lifetime, as opposed to women, who know there's a finite period of time to reproduce, and then game over," says Dr. Philip Werthman, director of the Center for Male Reproductive Medicine in Los Angeles. "Because they're not bounded by the same constraints, it's not something that men sit around and worry about."

And, to a certain extent, their nonchalance makes sense. While a man's sperm count decreases over time, the drop-off in fertility usually isn't dramatic (or even problematic)—nothing like the statistical plunge a woman experiences after 40. But this doesn't mean everything about late-in-life baby-making is hunky-dory for guys. Even though men produce sperm throughout their lives, its quality often declines. And even if their sperm is healthy, many older men have conditions that can seriously hamper their ability to get the little fellas where they need to go.

## **Quality, Not Quantity**

Of the two problems, sperm quality is the one we know less about. It could also be the more dangerous. Dr. Rebecca Sokol, a professor of medicine at the University of Southern California and the president of the Society for Male Reproduction and Urology, says medical researchers only recently have begun to look into whether there's a connection between the age of fathers and genetic conditions in their babies. While the findings thus far are vague, she says, some disturbing trends have surfaced. "We are seeing subtle increased frequency of diseases associated with a man aging," she says.

During the past decade, various studies have uncovered possible links with older fathers and inherited disorders in children, such as [schizophrenia](#), some kinds of dwarfism and a type of mental retardation known as [Fragile X syndrome](#). Most recently, a September 2006 study in the journal *Archives of General Psychiatry* found that fathers older than 40 were six times more likely to produce an [autistic](#) child than fathers under 30. Also, a June 2006 report in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that men's risk of fathering children with [achondroplasia](#) dwarfism increased by about 2 percent per year once men reached about 25.

Sokol cautions that, as of right now, there's only a statistical connection between delayed fatherhood and these disorders—not proof of causation. Nonetheless, she says, men need to be aware of the role their age might play in the development of their children. "Older men do need to be more concerned about deformities," she says.

## The Ticking Prostate

Aging can also impact men's ability to have children at all. And often in ways that aren't immediately obvious. Take [prostate cancer](#). According to the National Cancer Institute, the risk of prostate cancer increases dramatically after a man turns 65. In fact, about a third of all American men older than 50 have signs of it, and by age 75, more than 50 percent will have experienced some kind of cancerous change to the gland.

But in addition to being life-threatening, this common cancer carries major reproductive consequences. The prostate produces semen, the fluid that delivers sperm, and cancer can alter that fluid so that it no longer offers effective transport. Meanwhile, the treatments for prostate cancer often leave men unable to get an erection or properly ejaculate—two big problems if you want to conceive a baby somewhere other than a petri dish.

Other common biological troubles come with age. The vas deferens, the so-called sperm tube, can get sealed off by a varicose vein. The treatment for [benign prostate hyperplasia](#)—also known as an enlarged prostate—often leaves men unable to ejaculate. And excess body fat increases the amount of estrogen in the blood, lowering sperm count. Taken all together, these perils make it clear that fertility isn't a given after men pass a certain age.

"Media has sold it as anybody can have anything they want at any time they want, and I don't think that's true," Werthman says. Instead, he and Sokol want young men to learn what their particular risks are and what controllable factors could affect their fertility later on. And, if a couple is having trouble conceiving, both doctors say that the man ought to be the first one tested. "It's so much easier and cheaper to evaluate a man's fertility," Werthman says. "But everybody does a gazillion-dollar invasive work on the woman first, even though more than 40 percent of infertility is related to men."

*Maggie Koerth-Baker's work has appeared in AARP magazine, The Associated Press and Health magazine.*