Fertility Preservation Before Cancer Treatment Is Successful

In a long-term study, 71% of women who chose to get pregnant gave birth successfully.

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In news that will no doubt come as a relief to women of childbearing age fighting cancer, a recent study found that the majority of women who chose to preserve their fertility prior to treatment and later decided to try for a baby became mothers.

By analyzing data on 879 young women who sought fertility counseling in advance of receiving chemotherapy or radiation therapy between 2000 and 2019, Dalia Khalife, MD, a clinical fellow in reproductive medicine at Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospital in London, and colleagues ascertained that a number went on to have biological children.

The researchers found that 373 patients (42%) opted to preserve their fertility via egg or embryo freezing or both or via ovarian cryopreservation. In the course of the study, 61 (16%) of them retrieved their frozen eggs or embryos to attempt pregnancy.

Of those women, 44 (71%) successfully gave birth.

The median age of the women was 33. Khalife says she expects that as more of the younger women in the study decide to start families, the overall number of successful births will rise too. The results were presented at the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology's (ESHRE) 36th annual meeting, which was held virtually last week.

In her presentation, Khalife noted that several women in the study were able to conceive naturally, which she attributed to the variable effects of chemotherapy and radiation on ovarian reserve levels. Because cancers are not created equal in terms of their impact on reproductive capability, however, becoming and staying pregnant without medical assistance isn't a possibility for all female survivors.

Fertility outcomes between cancer types also varied: Women who had been treated for breast cancer were much more likely to be able to carry a baby to term than women who had been treated for lymphoma.

Chemotherapy and radiation therapy, which cause mass cell death, are known to reduce female

fertility by a significant margin, making fertility preservation an increasingly sought-after service among young women and girls with cancer. Khalife predicts that demand will only increase as the technology becomes more widely available.

To read more about the effects of cancer treatment on women's reproductive health, click here.

To read one woman's plea for comprehensive fertility counseling, read "Infertility Grief."
