



Choosing a fertility clinic

With so many people having to pay for their own fertility treatment, choosing the right clinic can seem a daunting task. It's one decision you really want to get right, but it can be difficult to know exactly what you ought to be looking for.

Find out about your options

The first step is to find out about the clinics you may want to consider. If you go to the HFEA website (www.hfea.gov.uk), you will find a section called Choosing a Clinic. If you type in your postcode, it will give a list of the clinics closest to your home. There's a lot of detailed information about each individual clinic, but the thing most people turn to first is the success rates

How to look at success rates

The HFEA website gives success rates for each clinic as well as publishing national figures. Most clinics in the UK have broadly similar rates but they will differ depending on the patients they treat. The success rates are broken down in a variety of ways, and are usually given for cycle started and per embryo transfer - it doesn't matter which you choose to look at, but it is vital to make sure you are comparing like with like. You should also look at the figures for people in your own age group.

Making judgements based on small percentage increases or decreases is probably not a very meaningful way of comparing one clinic with another as these can be influenced by a number of factors and often vary from year to year, but what is important is consistency with the national average. The HFEA website tells you whether a clinic is broadly average, above average or below average and this can help your decision-making.

Other information from the HFEA website

You will also be able to find out whether the clinic offers NHS or private treatment or both. It gives practical information about the clinic opening hours, about the treatments offered, the opening hours

Do also check the multiple birth rate as if a clinic is producing lots of multiples, it doesn't have your best interests at heart. When you are longing for a family of your own, it can be tempting to think that a multiple pregnancy would be an ideal outcome but multiple birth is the single biggest risk after fertility

treatment. A good fertility clinic will have a low multiple birth rate and a good success rate.

Location

You will have to pay regular visits to a fertility clinic, and a very long or awkward journey can add to the stress of treatment. It's a good idea to check how often you'd be expected to visit during treatment and to find out whether the clinic can offer appointments to fit around your job. Some large fertility clinics work with a number of other smaller units to enable people to have at least part of their treatment closer to home.

Cost

Clinics set their own treatment prices and these are not regulated. They can vary and if you are trying to compare prices, make sure you are clear about exactly what is included. The HFEA requires clinics to offer patients a personalised costed treatment plan so that you don't get any unpleasant financial surprises.

NHS treatment

Whether or not you qualify for NHS treatment will depend on where you live as well as your age and eligibility. It is not the individual hospital you choose to visit which dictates whether you can have NHS treatment but your local primary care trust. Each primary care trust decides on a budget for fertility treatment which may not always be in line with the recommendations made by NICE (The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) which say that three full cycles of treatment - that includes a fresh cycle and the transfer of any additional frozen embryos - should be offered when a woman is 39 and under.

Eligibility

If you are having NHS treatment, there will be eligibility criteria for treatment and even those who are paying for private treatment will find that most clinics have an age limit. Your age, your weight, any previous children, whether you smoke and your ovarian reserve (that's an estimate of the number of eggs left in your ovaries) may all be taken into consideration.

Specialisms

Most clinics can offer most fertility treatments, but some provide a wider range than others. Check that the clinic offers the treatment you think you will need. Some consultants specialise in certain aspects of infertility, and if you are choosing between two similar clinics, it may be worth seeing if either has particular expertise at treating patients with your fertility problem.

Support

One common complaint from patients after treatment is that they didn't ever see the same staff twice at the clinic, and that this made it more difficult. If you feel this would matter to you, ask whether you will be able to see the same people each time you visit the clinic. You may also want to ask whether counselling will be included in the cost of treatment, and if so how many sessions - even if you start out feeling that you don't want counselling, you may find it helpful further down the line.

Some clinics have patient support groups, so ask about this as sharing experiences with others who are going through the same thing can be very beneficial. Check whether a clinic is affiliated to Infertility Network UK through the Clinic Outreach Scheme too - this shows that the clinic is interested in giving back to the charity that supports you.

Waiting times

Try to find out how soon you would be able to get a first appointment, whether any more tests would have to be done and how long the waiting time is for treatment. There are often longer waiting times for donor eggs or sperm, so ask about this if it is relevant.

Do you like the clinic?

It may sound silly, but your gut feeling is important when choosing a clinic. Go along to open days or meetings and see how the clinic feels to you. Fertility treatment isn't always easy, but it is certainly much easier if you are being looked after by people you like and trust.

Useful links

HFEA website - www.hfea.org.uk

One at a Time - www.oneatatime.org.uk

Infertility Network UK - www.infertilitynetworkuk.com

British Infertility Counselling Association - www.bica.net