

Prospective parents given more choice over when to start a family

- Change will empower future parents and give them even greater control over fertility choices
- Storage limits will no longer be governed by medical need

People across the UK will have more choice over when to start a family as the government sets out plans to increase the storage limits for eggs, sperm and embryos.

Following a public consultation last year, proposals will be introduced to increase the statutory storage limits for everyone from the current 10 years, to a 10 year renewable storage period up to a maximum of 55 years.

Under the new system, prospective parents will be given the option at 10 year intervals to keep or dispose of frozen eggs, sperm and embryos.

This update not only ensures greater reproductive choice and less pressured decision-making for parents thinking about when to start a family, it will ensure greater equality as the same rules will apply to everyone and storage limits will not be dictated by medical need.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Sajid Javid, said:

The current storage arrangements can be severely restrictive for those making the important decision about when to start a family, and this new legislation will help turn off the ticking clock in the back of people's minds.

There are any number of reasons why someone may choose to preserve their fertility, and it is one of the most personal decisions any of us can make. Technological breakthroughs – including in egg freezing – have changed the equation in recent years and its only right that this progress puts more power into the hands of potential parents.

By making these changes, we are going to take a huge step forwards – not just for giving people greater freedom over their fertility, but for equality too.

The proposed changes are made possible by using the latest freezing methods. Evidence shows frozen eggs can be stored indefinitely without deterioration, due to a new freezing technique called vitrification, and changes reflect the increasing success of using frozen embryos in routine IVF treatment.

It would be inappropriate for the limit to apply to all cases so there will be additional conditions around third party donors and posthumous use. This

will be consulted upon separately.

Julia Chain, Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) Chair, said:

We welcome the government's plans to extend the storage limit for frozen eggs, sperm and embryos, bringing the law in line with advances in science, changes in modern society and individuals' reproductive choices.

This is great news for patients, giving them more time to make important decisions about family planning.

Any decision to store or preserve eggs, sperm or embryos is a serious one and anyone considering this must be given full information on the procedures involved, including the best time to freeze and likelihood of successfully using them to have a baby in future.

It is important that the new rules are clear and that fertility clinics are given adequate time to update their procedures to ensure they can both implement the changes effectively and give patients sufficient information so that they are fully informed about their options.

Minister for Innovation, Lord Bethell said:

People across the UK are starting families later in life and it is increasingly commonplace for people to choose to freeze their eggs, sperm and embryos to preserve fertility. There are myriad reasons for this, such as not being ready or able to start a family or having a medical condition that can lead to premature infertility.

Prospective parents should not have to wrestle with time limits on their fertility choices, and this important change to storage timescales will give people more control over their future and eliminate the pressure that comes with knowing a decision has to be made within 10 years.

Supportive quotes

Raj Mathur, Chair of the British Fertility Society (BFS) said:

The British Fertility Society welcomes the Government's changes to the statutory maximum storage period for eggs, sperm and embryos. Technological advances mean that storage of reproductive material is a safe and effective way of protecting fertility for many individuals.

This change ensures that UK regulation is compliant with the scientific evidence about the safety of storage, and protects the ability of all our patients to make reproductive choices for themselves as individuals and couples.

As professionals delivering care in this field, we are delighted that our advocacy has resulted in a change for the better for our patients, reducing unintended discrimination and protecting autonomy.

We look forward to working with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to ensure clinics are supported to implement this change. We also call upon NHS commissioners to ensure that the required improvements to services are implemented fairly and all patients are able to benefit from this welcome change.

Jason Kasarie, Chair of ARCS said:

The proposed changes are a welcome improvement for the sector and most importantly our patients.

The current storage limits have in some cases negatively impacted upon reproductive choice for couples by placing an artificial deadline, which would not be faced by those attempting to conceive naturally, on treatment.

The proposed, fairer, storage limits will help to alleviate unnecessary stress for our patients and streamline the process of storage for assisted conception clinics.

Background

- The legislation will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.