

Storage limit for frozen eggs, sperm and embryos to be reconsidered

People could have their frozen eggs, sperm and embryos stored for longer, as the government today launches a call for views on whether the current law to store them for 10 years should change.

Currently the storage period is limited to a maximum of 10 years, after which people must choose whether to undergo fertility treatment, or have their frozen eggs, sperm and embryos destroyed.

Only those stored for medical reasons, such as cancer treatment and premature infertility, can be preserved for longer – up to 55 years in total.

The consultation will consider whether the limit should be extended in line with significant improvements in freezing technologies.

Both men and women may choose to freeze their sperm or eggs for a variety of reasons, such as wanting to have children in future but not having a partner, or to preserve them while being treated for cancer.

The consultation will also consider arguments about whether women are disproportionately affected by the current time limit.

The number of women choosing to freeze their eggs has increased by 257% in the last 5 years. There were 1,462 egg freezing cycles in 2017 compared with 410 in 2012.

If a woman freezes her eggs in her 20s when her fertility is at its peak, she has a better chance of achieving a healthy pregnancy. However, if frozen at this age, the 10-year storage limit will expire in the woman's 30s, which may be too early for some to start a family.

Currently, the most common age for women to freeze their eggs for treatment is 38, when the likelihood of a successful pregnancy from using these eggs is much lower.

The government will also consider:

- the safety and quality issues related to prolonged storage
- the additional demand for storage facilities that will arise if the statutory time limit is increased

Minister for Care Caroline Dinenage said:

Every person should be given the best possible opportunity to start a family, which is why it is so important that our laws reflect the latest in technological advancements.

Although this could affect any one of us, I am particularly concerned by the impact of the current law on women's reproductive choices. A time limit can often mean women are faced with the heart-breaking decision to destroy their frozen eggs, or feel pressured to have a child before they are ready.

As the number of people seeking this storage rises, we want to hear from the public about whether the law is fair and proportionate, and ensure everyone is empowered to choose when they become parents.

Sally Cheshire CBE, Chair of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), said:

The HFEA welcomes the launch of the consultation on the gamete and embryo storage limits.

As the fertility regulator we have heard the voices of patients and clinicians calling for a review and extension of the current time limit for egg, embryo and sperm storage.

While any change to the 10-year storage limit would be a matter for Parliament as it requires a change in law, we believe the time is right to consider what a more appropriate storage limit could be that recognises both changes in science and in the way women are considering their fertility.