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Women's health experts highlight the risks of infertility and the limits of fertility treatments for women as they age

Ottawa – Featured in the November edition of the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada* is a new clinical practice guideline which suggests that women in their twenties and thirties need better counselling about the age-related risk of infertility and the limits of how much assisted reproductive technologies can help.

“Some Canadian women may be inadvertently postponing pregnancy too long,” said Dr. Kimberly Liu, principal co-author of this new SOGC guideline. “There is a sense that women may be overestimating the potential of assisted human reproductive technologies and underestimating the risks and complications associated with delaying pregnancy.”

Women should be aware that fertility begins to decline significantly in their early to mid thirties. As a result, women who delay conception are at increased risk of infertility. Prospective parents should also know that semen quality and male fertility also deteriorate with advancing age, and the risk of genetic disorders in offspring also increases.

As women age, many rely on fertility treatment to improve their chance of conceiving a child. However, a large proportion of women remain unaware of the success rates and limitations of human assisted reproduction technologies as well as the fact that the effectiveness of these procedures declines steadily for women in their late thirties and forties. Although assisted reproductive technologies may aid some couples who present with fertility issues, it will not compensate for the decline in natural fertility which occurs with delayed childbearing.

“Fertility treatments aren't a sure-fire route to pregnancy - their rates of success are greatly influenced by age-related declines in fertility,” added Dr. Allison Case, principal co-author of the guideline. “Time can be of the essence for a woman in her thirties who needs assistive reproductive technology - it is important that she gets appropriate treatment for her age.”

As a result, these new guidelines were written to guide primary health-care providers, obstetricians and gynaecologists in caring for and counselling their patients about age-related effects on reproduction.

The proportion of women who delay childbearing beyond the age of 35 years has increased significantly in recent decades. While the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) acknowledges that many women successfully become pregnant beyond the age of 35, the Society also feels that the public should fully understand the implications of having children later in life, as maternal age is the most important factor which affects fertility.

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