

JOURNEYING THROUGH THE IN-VITRO FERTILISATION (IVF) PROCESS

As a couple taking your first step into the IVF journey, there may be many changes in your emotions through the different stages. There is a mix of hope, optimism, stress and anxiety all at once. Each individual will experience stress differently, depending on your unique personality and life experiences that you have been through.

Throughout the cycle, you and your partner may experience similar levels of uncertainty, responding with mixed feelings involving distress and more positive feelings such as hope and emotional closeness. It is noteworthy that women tend to experience the distress component on a more intense level.

To prepare you for the road ahead, here are some corresponding psychosocial changes you may expect at different checkpoints of your IVF journey:

Pre-IVF stages



1. Counselling and consent

At the beginning of your IVF journey, a clinician will explain and discuss the procedure with you. At this point, you may feel overwhelmed and bewildered by the toll that IVF can take on your mental well-being. There are several aspects to consider, and important medical decisions that have to be made.

As you navigate the uncertainty and nervousness when embarking on this new chapter, it is important for partners to support one another. The medical team will also be supporting you through every step of the way, so you can raise your concerns or questions anytime when needed.

2. Pre-programme preparations

The next step would comprise pre-programme preparations. This includes blood tests and semen analysis. It is common to feel uneasy and anxious as you undergo these unfamiliar medical tests. Stress levels may also increase, as you anticipate these test results.

As you inch closer to the start of the IVF process itself, you may also feel a mixture of hope and worry. Do take the time to get in touch with your emotions, so that you are able to keep track of your feelings and ensure your mental well-being throughout the process. It is also important for partners to share your emotions with each other regularly, and to look forward to the journey ahead.



IVF stages

3. Injections, sperm preparation, egg collection


Now that your IVF journey is underway, there will be a series of procedures taking place. It can cause both physical and emotional discomfort, which may result in heightened levels of stress. For couples unfamiliar with slightly more invasive treatments, there can also be a sense of fear and anxiety during this stage.

This period can be isolating and lonely, resulting in tension within couples. You could be surrounded by other couples who are expecting children, or relatives with high expectations for the IVF procedure. These social pressures may cause you to withdraw from these circles, as it may feel easier to manage your emotions on your own. It is important for partners to support each other through the potentially taxing line-up of multiple injections and medical check-ups.

4. Fertilisation

The initial procedures that will take place during this IVF journey involved the sperm and the collected eggs which will then be added in a dish to allow fertilisation to occur by natural selection. A check to confirm that fertilisation has occurred would be carried out the following day.

At this point, the stress and anticipation may have been building up. As you approach this hurdle, you may be worried that fertilisation may be unsuccessful. Unfortunately, in about 10% of couples, there is no fertilisation at all.





5. Embryo Transfer

In this final stage of the IVF journey, embryos are placed into your uterus. Excess embryos will be frozen for future use.

The waiting period between transfer and the pregnancy test is often described to be the most challenging part of the IVF cycle. This can be attributed to the distress and intrusive cognitions about the nature and implications of the result, which can hurt the couple's socio-emotional wellbeing.

Psychosocial coping when embarking on IVF journey

Although every couple is unique, here are some tips that will be useful when preparing for a fresh IVF cycle:

(1) Conducting research and planning ahead for decision-making

IVF can be an anxiety-inducing journey. Bridging information gaps can be one of the best solutions for this.

(2) Attending to your psyche and social relationships

A long struggle with fertility-related concerns may take a toll on your physical and mental well-being. Prioritise self-care and stay in touch with your emotions by reflecting on your experiences frequently. Also reach out to your partner, family members and friends for support during this period. It could be daunting and pressurising to do so, so be sure to do this at your own pace and comfort level.



(3) Identifying stressors and coping mechanisms

Eliminate unnecessary stress in your life and put your mental health first. Stress reduction is an integral component of the IVF process. Stress management classes, listening to relaxation tapes and other techniques such as mindfulness can help with this. If the intensity of emotions gets overwhelming, do approach a professional for mental health support.

(4) Anticipate problem areas

As much as optimism and hope are central themes of the IVF process, it is key that couples plan for the ups and downs within the cycle, especially since everyone's body functions differently. There are possibilities for failure at different stages of the IVF journey, from a poor response to medication to unsuccessful fertilisation after retrieval.

(5) Prioritise the relationship with your partner

Tension, resentment, different expectations, and financial strain are all possible factors that may impact a couple's relationship. Marital satisfaction and couple intimacy could decline as a result. Commit to open communication so that less misunderstandings and less conflicts arise. Should you feel overwhelmed, you can also consider couple therapy for additional support.





(6) Focusing on your strengths and virtues

It is not uncommon to feel a sense of shame and embarrassment, especially in a family-oriented society such as Singapore. It is possible for the failure to conceive to become associated with a failure of the self. Focus on things that you value and are proud of. Write them down and remind yourself that you are more than simply a fertility status. Also consider lifting the weight off your shoulders by exploring your feelings with someone you trust.

Following a successful IVF cycle

You will be required to come to the KKH IVF Centre 17 days after the embryo transfer for a pregnancy test. If the pregnancy test reads positive - congratulations! You can look forward to the antenatal journey and anticipate the arrival of your baby.

Do prioritise your health during the pregnancy journey to give you and your baby the best start. Focus on your nutrition, get sufficient rest and stay physically active as you prepare for the next chapter of your life.





Following an unsuccessful IVF cycle

Feelings of grief may be experienced following an unsuccessful IVF cycle. Do give yourself the time and space to process this loss, and remember that it is important to exercise self-compassion as well. Sit down with your partner to reflect about the journey and outcome.

Different couples cope differently. Open communication is integral and can help to facilitate difficult conversations. Attend to each other's needs and emotions, making sure to support each other regardless of what the next step would be.

Attempting IVF again

Repeating the IVF process may be stressful and could evoke feelings of anxiety. It is essential for couples to retain a healthy mindset and practise self-care throughout the cycle. Be mindful of your emotions, and remain connected with your partner and loved ones as you embark on the next cycle.

Not attempting IVF again

Even if you decide not to attempt IVF again, there are also other alternatives to achieve parenthood. Have a meaningful discussion with your partner about your thoughts and plans moving forward. Decision-making can be challenging, so do take all the time you need before coming to a consensus on this.





Hospital and community resources available

Should you require further support, here are useful resources that you can turn to:

(1) KKH Medical Social Work Department

Telephone: +65 6394 1029 / +65 6394 1028

Website: <https://www.kkh.com.sg/patient-care/areas-of-care/allied-health-services/Pages/medical-social-work.aspx#>

(2) KKH Mental Wellness Service

Telephone: +65 6394 2205

Website: <https://www.kkh.com.sg/patient-care/areas-of-care/womens-services/Pages/womens-mental-wellness-service.aspx>

(3) Family Service Centres (FSC)

FSCs provide holistic support for families that are experiencing emotional, personal and social challenges in life. To locate your nearest FSC, please kindly refer to this website:

<https://www.msf.gov.sg/dfcs/familyservice/default.aspx>

While the IVF journey can sometimes feel like an isolated one, it does not have to be. We are here to support you through the different stages, whenever you are ready.