

HOW WOMEN OVER 50 ARE GETTING PREGNANT

By Taylor Mayol

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because not every woman can afford to freeze her eggs.

Maria Lancaster had already suffered through a handful of failed pregnancies in her late 30s and early 40s, and she remembers the despair she felt after she miscarried at 46, but she was determined to try again. Wanting a baby more than ever, Lancaster purchased a white wooden cradle and placed it next to her bed. Around the same time, her husband — a fan of Christian talk radio — heard the story of a woman who had just given birth through a radically new approach to fertility. When he got home, he burst into the kitchen to tell Lancaster the news. “He was just electrified,” she recalls. “I think he knew this was it.”

Indeed, at 47, Lancaster got pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. It wasn't through in vitro fertilization, egg or sperm donation, or even via surrogate. Lancaster is what some call a “snowflake mom”: a woman who's had a [child](#) through embryo adoption. Technically considered a property transfer, this process allows a woman to receive a frozen embryo from another couple and have it implanted in her uterus. As the age of first-time moms increases and more women are turning to science to have babies, embryo adoption is becoming increasingly attractive. It's considerably cheaper and faster than IVF or traditional adoption and has high success rates for would-be moms, whether they're 20 or 60. “If you're doing embryo adoption, age doesn't really matter as long as you have a uterus,” says Sam Najmabadi, an OB-GYN and fertility specialist.

WOMEN OVER THE AGE OF 44 HAVE A LESS THAN 4 PERCENT CHANCE OF SUCCESS WITH IVF, THOUGH THOSE ODDS JUMP TO 50-50 WITH A DONOR EMBRYO.

There are an estimated 600,000 embryos in storage in the U.S., and that number is growing, all thanks to the boom in IVF and advancements in fertility treatments. More IVF treatments mean more leftover embryos, though. During IVF, doctors create a bunch of embryos in a petri dish and implant some. Once a mom-to-be has a bun in her oven, she has to decide what to do with all those extra embryos. Typically the options have included freezing them, which costs around \$650 a year, destroying them or donating them to science. In 1998 — the same year that Louise Brown, the first test-tube baby, turned 20 — the idea of donating unused embryos to other couples struggling to conceive started to pick up steam. The science had made the transfer possible around that time, though it's hard to say precisely when the first embryo adoption occurred, thanks to the whole patient privacy thing.



Frozen embryo storage
SOURCE SEAN CULLIGAN / OZY

For some donor couples, especially those who believe embryos are more would-be kids than products of science, it's been a “miracle answer,” says Lancaster, who has opened her own embryo-adoption clinic. The broader movement to “adopt” embryos started in the right-wing ultra-Christian camp, among those who believe that life starts at conception, even if conception occurs in a lab instead of a woman's uterus. In fact, the government first promoted embryo adoption during George W.

Bush's tenure, a program that President Barack Obama has continued. All told, more than \$24 million in federal funds has been spent on promoting embryo adoption, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

The market has widened from pro-lifers to women who want a faster, cheaper and more effective way to get pregnant. The vast majority of women who choose these embryos today do so because they can't use their own eggs, says Kimberly Tyson, marketing and program director for the Embryo Adoption Awareness Center and Nightlight Christian Adoptions' embryo program. Women over the age of 44 have a less than 4 percent chance of success with IVF, though those odds jump to 50-50 with a donor embryo, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Assisted Reproductive Technology Report. Nearly 70 percent of the 465-plus reporting fertility clinics in the U.S. incorporate embryo adoption into their treatment options.



Sam Najmabadi at his fertility clinic.

SOURCE [SEAN CULLIGAN / OZY](#)

There are a couple of ways to get donated embryos — at fertility clinics like the one run by Najmabadi, or through adoption agencies such as Nightlight Christian Adoptions, the first embryo-adoption agency, which Tyson says has placed more

than 550 embryos. The latter option is far more expensive, at around \$15,000, but gives donors a chance to vet the recipient families like in a traditional adoption scenario that includes home visits. But that can be bad news for older would-be moms. Tyson says most donors have a hard time imagining someone in their late 40s mothering their sperm and eggs; they have an unofficial cutoff at 45. So even though science has caught up to the demand, there's still stigma against the growing group of women who have kids later in life, says Elizabeth Gregory, author of *Ready: Why Women Are Embracing the New Later Motherhood*.

For Najmabadi, though, health, not age, is the top priority. A majority of his patients are over 40, and women from all walks of life, from farmworkers to celebrities, come to him for help. After all, the price is right: a mere \$3,500 compared with upward of \$20,000 for some IVF treatments that have no guarantee of success. And as women continue to have kids later in life, it's not hard to imagine embryo adoption becoming as prevalent as IVF or traditional adoption is today.

An earlier version of this article misstated the success rate of IVF in women over 44.

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Originally published on [OZY.com](https://www.ozy.com)