

Transgender & Non-Binary Fertility Preservation - Sperm Freezing

Why is it a good idea to freeze sperm?

Future fertility may be something you are thinking about as a transgender or non-binary person. Understandably, some transgender and non-binary people are keen to start hormone therapy or have surgery as quickly as possible. However, you may find it a source of regret if you realise later that it is not possible, or more difficult, to have a biological family. Thinking through all these issues now and understanding your options will help you to make an informed decision. Before any of these procedures are carried out, it is possible to store sperm using a freezing process known as cryopreservation.

Some medical treatments for gender dysphoria or incongruence, including hormone therapy and surgery, can have a temporary or permanent impact on your fertility. If you are considering starting treatment to physically alter your body, or you have already started, you can contact us to discuss possible options for preserving your fertility.

What is the procedure for freezing sperm?

Once referred, The Hewitt Fertility Centre will telephone you to arrange an appointment to visit the centre and store your sperm. If possible, this appointment should be made before the gender reassignment treatment is due to begin.

Firstly, you will have a consultation with a member of staff to discuss the implications of storing your sperm and discuss the relevant consent forms. You will be asked questions with regards to the storage and use of stored samples. It may be useful (before your appointment) to consider, if you have a partner, whether you would like them to be able to use your stored samples in the future. At this appointment, you will also have the opportunity to ask any questions.

In order to store your sperm, you will require a blood test to screen for HIV, Hepatitis B & C; this is a legal requirement due to the theoretical risk of viral cross-contamination between samples.

You will then be asked to produce a semen sample. The centre has private, specially designed, sound-proof production rooms available in which you can produce your sample. In some circumstances, it may be possible to produce your sample at home, provided it is delivered to the centre within one hour.

What happens to my sperm once I've produced a sample?

Once you have produced your sample, a semen analysis test will be done to quantify the quality of the sample. If your sample is unsuitable for storage, additional tests may be required to understand why; if this occurs you can discuss your next steps and future options with your clinician.

Your sample will then have cryoprotectant added (a liquid that prevents damage to sperm cells during freezing) before being stored in a number of sperm straws. The straws are gradually cooled to -196°C . Once cooled, your sample will be placed into special containers called dewars, where they will be kept in liquid nitrogen vapour until you require them for fertility treatment, or no longer need them.

How many samples will I need to produce?

On average, three samples will be sufficient to safeguard future fertility options; however, the clinic will guide you on whether you need to produce more or less.

What are the legal implications for storing sperm?

All fertility centres fall under the regulation of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). Prior to freezing and storing sperm, it is a legal requirement that you give written consent concerning;

- Storage of your sperm and the length to which it is stored for
- The circumstances to which your sperm can be used in the future (you may have a partner with whom you wish to have a family named on your form)
- Your decision over any embryos created using your sperm
- What happens to your frozen sperm in the event of your death or incapacitation
- What will happen if your sperm is not used

You should be aware that in the event of your death, you can have your name registered as the parent of any child or children born as a result of using your sperm, provided you have consented to this in writing. If your circumstances change, for instance you move address, change telephone number, or separate from your partner at the time of storage, it is vitally important that you make the Hewitt Fertility Centre aware of these changes immediately. This is because we will contact you to ask if you still want your sperm to be stored. If we are unable to contact you, your samples will be destroyed when they reach the end of their statutory storage period. If you have any questions on sperm storage, please contact the unit and ask to speak to a member of the Andrology team.

I've already started my transitioning medication, what are my options?

If you have already started hormone therapy or you are taking puberty suppressing medication, you will need to discuss your future options with a clinician. They may recommend that you stop taking your medication to increase your chance of having a family through assisted family treatment. We understand that it can be distressing to come off hormone therapy, so there will be no pressure from the clinic to do this.

Some transgender and non-binary people may also consider other options for having a family, such as the use of donated eggs, sperm or embryos in treatment or adoption. Done in the right way, using a donor is a safe and increasingly common way of creating a family. If you're interested, please ask The Hewitt Fertility Centre for further advice and the relevant patient information leaflets.

How long can sperm be stored?

Sperm can be stored for up to 55 years; however, the storage period will be renewed every 10 years. You are free to withdraw or vary the terms of your consent at any time.

Do I have to pay for freezing & storage of my sperm?

Sperm freezing funding for gender reassignment is dependent upon the NHS clinical commissioning group that you fall under and your specific circumstances.

If NHS funding is available for you, when your funded storage period ends, you will be contacted by the Hewitt Fertility Centre to ask whether you wish to continue storage. Continued storage after this period will incur an annual fee (approximately £180 per year)

In the future, you may decide to have IVF treatment using a surrogate and your frozen sperm. For this reason, the clinical team may recommend that you undergo extended screening tests prior to freezing your sperm. In the future, if you decide to go ahead with this IVF treatment, you may then be required to undergo further extended screening tests at that time; these tests may incur a further cost.

If you are not pursuing NHS funding for any aspect of your treatment, you can contact the clinic directly for more information on treatment costs.

What are the risks of sperm freezing?

It is well established that a number of sperm can either be damaged or do not survive the freezing process. It is also clear that success depends on the quality of the initial sperm sample; frozen samples with reduced numbers of sperm or high rates of sperm abnormalities are less likely to be successful in treatment. However, it must be noted that treatment with frozen sperm is currently just as successful as treatment using fresh sperm (HFEA, 2021).

Safety & Quality

We promise to look after your sperm as carefully as possible, but we cannot be held responsible for its safety or the risk of the loss of sperm due to accident or equipment failure. In addition, we cannot guarantee your sperm will survive the freeze-thaw process or that a successful pregnancy will result from its use.

The Lewis-Jones Andrology Department at the Hewitt Fertility Centre has provided a dedicated Andrology service for over 30 years. We are attached to the Hewitt Fertility Centre HFEA licenced centre 0007) and can provide all fertility treatments potentially required in the future. We also have a centre at Knutsford (Centre number 0344) where the same care can be provided if more convenient and appropriate.

Contact with the unit

Please feel free to contact the laboratory on 0151 702 4214 or email lwft.andrologylab@nhs.net if you require any further information about fertility preservation.

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References:

HFEA (2021). *Sperm freezing, Fertility Preservation*. <https://www.hfea.gov.uk/treatments/fertility-preservation/sperm-freezing>.

This leaflet can be made available in different formats on request. If you would like to make any suggestions or comments about the content of this leaflet, then please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0151 702 4353 or by email at pals@lwh.nhs.uk

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