

TICK TOCK BABY CLOCK

Having fun while you're young? Then, whether you're male or female, this is the news you really don't want to read. New research shows it may already be too late for you to start a family. **Sarah Lang** investigates.

SO YOUR biological clock's ticking? No wonder many women get prickly about that phrase: it has a touch of desperation, as though any woman over 30 is clutching at the nearest guy to get the baby game started.

But like most stereotypes there's a speck of truth in it: not that modern-day women are desperate but that, unlike our sisters of yore, many of us aren't nesting and contemplating babies till our 30s and even 40s.

The average age of new mothers in New Zealand has crept up over the past 40 years from 25 to a high of more than 30. Overtaking the 25-29 age group, women aged 30 to 34 now have the highest birth rate, while around 12,500 babies are born in New Zealand each year to women 35-plus.

While such figures might lead you to think getting knocked up is no trickier than a bit of drunken New Year's nookie, childlessness is on the rise — and it's not always voluntary. The number of New Zealand couples having trouble conceiving has climbed

to between 1 in 6 and 1 in 4, depending on the definition and who you talk to.

But there is consensus on what counts more than everything else in determining fertility: the prospective mum's age. The decline in fertility

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PETI DEUXMONT
Wellington web-design-studio manager

begins in the late 20s and steadily accelerates throughout her 30s, nosediving at 35 and continuing to drop throughout her 40s. The rule of thumb is that it will take twice as long to conceive at 37 as at 27.

"While society's changed, our body clocks haven't caught up yet" says leading fertility expert Dr Richard Fisher of Auckland-based clinic Fertility Associates. "When I talk about the dropping chance of conception per month per age, it's astonishing how many people look at me with wide eyes and say 'that cannot be true'."

In a finding backed up by local surveys, a recent international study by the American Fertility Association found most women mistakenly think fertility begins to decline at 40.

That's exactly what Wellington web-design-studio manager Peti Deuxmont, 31, believed. Glossy-magazine coverage of celebrity mums like Nicole Kidman, 40, Halle Berry, 41, and Marcia Cross, 45, made Deuxmont think if she had kids later in life, "everything would be sweet".

When Deuxmont found out recently that fertility drops steeply from 35 and that she had fertility-complicating endometriosis and ovarian cysts, she was thrown.

"My husband and I wanted to have everything 'perfect' before starting a family." Now they're planning on trying for a baby in the new year.

If you're a normally-fertile 35 and want three children, you've got a 30 per cent chance of not reaching that goal even if everything goes normally "because you run out of time" says Fisher. "The issue is whether you want to roll the dice".

Yet many women think they'll be the one to beat the odds, especially if they're fit and healthy, right? That's the hope of a 34-year-old Auckland woman (she doesn't want to be named) who's planning babies in a year or two. "I'm basically counting on my relatively-healthy lifestyle to buy me a few more years of fertility. Am I justified or mistaken in that?"

She is mistaken, according to the experts.

"Keeping your body healthy doesn't keep your ovaries young" says Fisher.

While health-and-lifestyle factors including a normal BMI (neither overweight or underweight), fitness, limiting alcohol and not smoking will all help maximise your chances of conception, they're not determining factors. Around 10 per cent of couples experience a medical issue such as endometriosis, polycystic ovaries, operations on the ovaries, treatment for abnormal smears and a history of STDs.

While these aren't usually a problem on their own, add age and it can spell trouble. And although stress has been the holy grail in trying to crack unexplained infertility, current data suggests it has a negligible impact.

No test can tell you how fertile you are, but women who want to check their reproductive window can now do so. You may have seen recent headlines about a new test that measures Anti-Mullerian Hormone blood levels to pinpoint the number of eggs left.

Experts are careful to point out this test isn't a magic bullet; just a pointer



HAPPY FAMILY: Ben Rohrlach, left, and Maria-Fe, right, with their daughter

as to whether a woman has the same chance of conception as anybody else her age.

Of course, when to have kids is seldom just a biological decision. Education, career, travel, setting yourself up financially with the house and the bank balance, not to mention meeting the right man ... there's myriad of boxes to tick before even thinking about sprogs.

Caught between the socio-personal rock and the biological hard place,

many women aren't sure when they'll start a family. While a study by education-and-support agency FertilityNZ reports 84 per cent of women say the 20s is the ideal childbearing time, over two-thirds of women in their 20s and nearly half of women in their 30s say they aren't ready yet.

"A lot of women postpone motherhood and have quite a lot of ambivalence about that," says Christchurch author Lois Tonkin,

NOT JUST A GIRL THING...

WHILE LOW sperm count is a factor in half of couples with medically-unexplained infertility, they're often a complication rather than the cause.

But it's not just women whose fertility drops with age; a paternal age of 40-plus halves the chances of a woman conceiving and

increases the risk of miscarriage; a father aged 50-plus doubles the chance of fetal death.

Meanwhile, the much-hyped male "fertility pill" helps only a small group with sperm damage. The good news? Testes-overheating in tight undies are unlikely to make or break things.



LOVING FAMILY: Aleada and Roger Branch gave up on fertility treatments and adopted their son Zayne.

HANNAH JOHNSTON



Mia-Grace. Maria Fe runs an internet business Nestling that sells merino wool baby garments.

STEPHEN BARKER

who's just been awarded a \$90,000 scholarship to fund her sociology PhD on the "social infertility" phenomenon.

The term's been coined to describe the increasing number of New Zealand women who want children but aren't having them for social rather than biological reasons.

You won't find these women in the stats. Statistics NZ's Demographic Trends 2007 childlessness graph lumps women who aren't biologically infertile into the "voluntary childlessness" group (up from less than 1 per cent of 1936-born women to nearly 10 per cent of women born in 1965, now aged 43). Says Tonkin: "Often it's not voluntary at all. Women feel thwarted by social circumstances."

"These women are statistically invisible and I suspect in many ways they're socially invisible." Studies show that not finding the right man is by far the main factor in women postponing motherhood.

That's partly a numbers game: New Zealand women between the peak

childbearing ages of 30 and 34 outnumber men by 9 per cent.

No Mr Right is the reason why 50-year-old Aleada Branch, a clinical-research associate at an Auckland pharmaceutical company, left kids so late. After her first husband changed his mind about wanting children, on their five-year anniversary and at nearly 39 she "realised this biological clock was ticking pretty loudly" and left him. A year-and-a-half later she met keen-on-kids Roger, but they didn't start trying until almost a year after the marriage.

"I wasn't informed about the age factor in my 20s and 30s, so I thought I can have a child in my 40s, no problem." But there was, because of ageing eggs. After four rounds of fertility treatment, she finally became pregnant and miscarried at 12 weeks; after one more cycle they gave up and adopted 2-year-old Zayne (now 5).

She and Roger, 56, will try for another child if they locate a hard-to-find egg donor.

While not finding the right bloke is the main rationale in putting off kids, another reason is financial security, with many women wanting to buy a house and build up some sound savings first.

And despite the assumption that many women are putting off babies to further their careers, studies show this concern features a lot further down the list. One survey found that their partner's career rated as a higher concern than their own.

Because, of course, baby decisions are usually made in the context of a relationship with two careers, financial situations, and sets of priorities.

While the baby question can be a deal-breaker, if you both want the pitter-patter of tiny feet there are six major things to discuss, says British doctor expert Miriam Stoppard.

These are motives for bringing a child into the world; the effect on your current lifestyle; your relationship's shelf life; your attitudes to education, discipline, religion and childcare; your

PLAYING THE WAITING GAME

Contemplating when to have kids? Our unscientific quiz might give you some pointers: tick the boxes and add up your number.



1. Are you aged:
— 36-40 (3 points) ☐
— 30-35 (7 points) ☐
— under 30 (10 points) ☐

2. Found the right bloke? (5 points) ☐

3. If so, is he under 40? (1 point) ☐

4. Got some savings? (1 point) ☐

5. Don't mind pausing on the career ladder to admire the view? (1 point) ☐

6. Bought a house? (1 point) ☐

7. Is your BMI in the normal range? (1 point) ☐

8. Got a clean bill of reproductive health (including a clear STD slate)? (1 point) ☐

9. Never had endometriosis, polycystic ovaries or other similar conditions? (1 point) ☐

10. You don't drink a bottle of wine every night? (1 point) ☐

11. Don't smoke? (1 point) ☐

12. Keep your stress levels low? (1 point) ☐

0-6 points: Are you sure you really want children? If so, talk to your doctor and your partner (or find one of each), think about making some changes, and get on to it pronto.

7-12 points: The clock's a-ticking and you're not getting any younger. Start trying now, in order to give yourself time should it prove difficult.

13-18 points: We know your mother is dropping hints, but you're on track with your health and personal life, and if you're under 35 there's no reason you can't wait.

19-25 points: There's no rush! Enjoy a few more drinks, have that overseas trip, and don't worry about it yet.



YOUNG NESTER

FORGET THAT high-school-dropout stereotype: at 24, Maria-Fe Rohrlach is smart, ambitious, and pregnant with number two.

As well as looking after 17-month-old daughter Mia-Grace, Rohrlach runs online baby-merino-products business, Nestling, from home in Ngatea, near Thames.

"My mum started having her 6 kids when she was 22 so it just felt natural to me. My friends were getting awesome jobs, building up their resumes, travelling. But there's no such thing as the perfect time, and we want four!"

Being a young mum, says Rohrlach, means "you're more open, more flexible, less set-in-your-ways".

Plus, she says, living a simple, child-focussed lifestyle is helping her and husband Ben get ahead faster. Meanwhile she's stoked her kids will grow up forging a close relationship with their still-in-their-50s grandparents.

"When I was first getting my head around becoming a mum, there was a little bit of fear that I might miss out on potential career opportunities or other things, but those fears diminished. I'm so glad we've gone down this road."

bank balance; and whether one of you has a burning desire to do something else first. Although studies show childless couples are as happy as couples with children (albeit for different reasons), for many women the stork heightens happiness.

A recent study found that late mothers were happier than both childless women, and early or "on-time" mothers.

That's partly down to qualities such as maturity, patience, wisdom, financial stability and confidence, which tend to come with age.

One major social implication of leaving it later is that grandparents will be older, less actively involved, or not around at all. With her husband's parents and her father dead, and her mother turning 90 in January, the fact that Zayne and any future children won't have grandparents is something Aleada Branch has come to terms with, along with probably eschewing her own grandmother duties.

And yes a feminist critique might

argue the tick-tock-baby-clock message is a campaign by (mostly-male) experts exhorting young women to get barefoot and pregnant or risk missing their meaning in life. Fisher jokes that by highlighting maternal age's impact on fertility for 20 years he's been trying to put his fertility clinic out of business.

Clearly his motivation is seeing the "distressing" consequences of leaving it too late. "People tend to plan their fertility around their life not their life around their fertility, which is odd when fertility is critical to your future plans." Adds FertilityNZ executive director Michelle Collyer: "We're quite happy planning our finances, our retirement, but our fertility? Nope."

Neither is suggesting women jump into something they're not ready for yet. But if you know what's what with fertility while you're young, you can make an informed choice rather than just hitting snooze on the baby button. And then, hopefully, everyone will shut up about that bloody ticking clock.