

# Fertility Preservation for Patients with Cancer

*Before your cancer treatment*

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*This handout is for patients of childbearing age who have cancer. It explains what you can do before you have cancer treatment to protect your ability to have children. We are here to support you as you think about these important decisions.*

## What is fertility preservation?

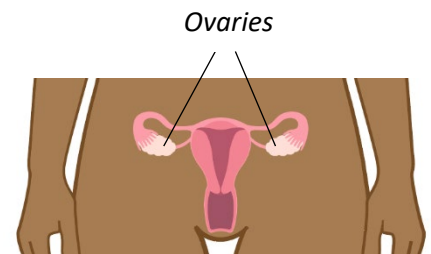
*Fertility* is your ability to become pregnant and carry the pregnancy to a live birth. Some cancers and cancer treatments can affect your fertility.

*Fertility preservation* protects your ability to have children. If you wish to have children in the future, you can consider options for fertility preservation before you have your cancer treatment.

## How does cancer treatment affect fertility?

You were born with all the eggs your body will ever have. Your eggs are stored in your ovaries. This is your *ovarian reserve*.

Chemotherapy, radiation, and some cancer surgeries can damage or destroy your eggs or harm your *uterus* (womb). The amount of damage depends on your age, your overall health, and the type of treatment you have.



### Radiation

High doses of radiation can affect your fertility:

- **Radiation to the pelvis** can destroy some of your eggs. This lowers your chance of having children. It can also affect your uterus. You may start *menopause* (stop having periods) at an earlier age than normal.
- **Radiation to the uterus** may damage it. A damaged uterus may not be able to grow to full size or stretch to carry a baby.
- **Radiation to the brain** can affect the glands that control your hormones and your periods.

### Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy medicines can be *ovotoxic* (damages your ovaries). The amount of damage depends on your age and the medicine you receive. The younger you are when you have chemotherapy, the more likely you are to start having periods again. But many patients who are over 35 years old are at risk for early menopause after having chemotherapy.

## Surgery

If your cancer surgery removes your:

- **Ovaries:** you will no longer have any eggs and cannot have biological children.
- **Uterus:** you cannot become pregnant or carry a child.

## What are my options for fertility preservation?

If having children in the future is important to you, there may be steps you can take before treatment begins. Your care team is here to help you explore what is possible. Your options depend on:

- The type and stage of your cancer
- How soon you must start cancer treatment

Talk with your *oncologist* (cancer doctor) about your treatment plan. Ask if you can use one of the following methods to preserve your fertility.

### Banking

- **Embryo banking** uses *in vitro fertilization* (IVF). For IVF, you receive hormone injections and may also take pills. These medicines cause your ovaries to produce many mature eggs at the same time. These eggs are collected during a minor surgery called *egg retrieval*.  
Your eggs can then be fertilized with sperm. This creates *embryos*. Good quality embryos are then frozen (*cryopreserved*) and saved to be used later (*banked*).
- **Egg banking** is like embryo banking. But the collected eggs are frozen without being fertilized.

### Ovarian Tissue Freezing

Small pieces of healthy ovarian tissue are removed in surgery and frozen. This tissue contains eggs in their follicles. After your cancer treatment is done, the tissue is thawed and placed back in your body. We do not yet know if ovarian tissue freezing will work for all patients.

### Medicine to Protect Your Ovaries

You can take hormones that put your ovaries into a state of rest. This can prevent heavy vaginal bleeding during chemotherapy. This method is not yet proven. We do not know if it improves fertility after cancer treatment for all patients.

## Does insurance cover fertility preservation?

Talk with your insurance company about what your plan covers. Some plans do not cover fertility preservation, even if you have cancer.

Financial concerns can add extra stress during an already challenging time. If cost is a barrier, programs like Sharing Hope may be able to help. The Center for Reproductive Health and Fertility takes part in this program, which helps cancer patients and survivors access fertility preservation services. It is sponsored by the LIVESTRONG Foundation.

To learn more, visit: [livestrong.org/we-can-help/livestrong-fertility](https://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/livestrong-fertility)

## What are my options after cancer treatment?

- **If your ovaries are damaged but your uterus is healthy:** You may be able to become pregnant with the help of an egg or embryo donor.
- **If your uterus is damaged but your ovaries and eggs are healthy:** You may be able to use a *gestational carrier* (surrogate) to carry and give birth to your child.
- **If both your ovaries and uterus are damaged:** Having biological children will not be possible. However, you still have options for growing your family, such as adoption or foster parenting. If you are considering adoption, check with agencies to ensure they support applicants who are cancer survivors.

## What questions should I ask my doctors?

- How soon do I need to start cancer treatment?
- Will my cancer or its treatment affect my ability to have children in the future?
- What are my fertility preservation options?
- Do any of these options make my cancer treatment less effective? Do they increase the chance that cancer will return?
- If my oncologist is unsure about my treatment outcome, can I still bank embryos or eggs?

Making decisions about fertility during cancer treatment can feel overwhelming, but you are not alone. We are here to support you, answer your questions, and help you explore the best path forward.



***Talk with your healthcare provider if you have any questions about how your cancer treatment will affect your fertility.***

### Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

**Center for Reproductive Health and Fertility:**

**Weekdays 8 am – 5 pm:**  
Call 206.598.4225

**After hours, weekends, and holidays:** Call 206.598.6190 and ask to page the CRHF provider on call.