

# EGGS ON ICE

CAN REPRODUCTIVE  
TECHNOLOGY FINALLY  
STOP A WOMAN'S  
BIOLOGICAL  
CLOCK?

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**TRACI RADCLIFFE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE** kind of woman to have it all. Smarts, looks, personality — and a jet-set career.

“There are days when I’m on a plane Monday morning and don’t come home until Friday evening,” says Radcliffe, a sales account manager for a Fortune 200 company. “I travel all over the country.”

But there’s one goal this power woman hasn’t checked off her to-do list — having a baby. Not even when she married a well-to-do investment banker who urged her to quit her job and start a family. “I remember thinking, ‘Why? Why would I do that?’” Radcliffe says. “I didn’t want to be a stay-at-home mom. I wasn’t ready to just give up my career and have kids.”

Now divorced, and clearly a professional success to the tune of nearly half a million dollars a year, Radcliffe still isn’t quite ready to exchange her briefcase for a diaper bag. But this year she turned 39 and suddenly heard her biological clock ticking loudly in her ear. The enterprising businesswoman decided to look for a solution.

She found the answer in Dr. John Jain,

a reproductive endocrinologist who has dedicated his life to perfecting the delicate art of extracting and freezing human ovarian eggs. “I really consider myself part of a social revolution,” says Jain of his job. “Emancipating and promoting a woman’s ability to choose how and, most importantly, *when* she’ll have a family.”

Jain is the founder of the Egg Freezing Center in Santa Monica, where for \$15,000, a woman can have her eggs extracted, frozen and saved for fertilization for 10 years or more. “With today’s technology, an egg’s viability can really be indefinite,” Jain says. “We can freeze an egg for one year or 10 years — there’s no difference. The only question is the health of the mother. We’ve had women in their 50s carry a baby. As long as they’re healthy, they do just fine.”

That’s a huge leap forward in reproductive science, considering that just a decade ago, thawing methods were so flawed that eggs were often too damaged for fertilization. “Sure, we could freeze the eggs,” Jain says, “but the

question was, could we make a baby from them?” He says the eggs were literally suffering from freezer burn.

Today, eggs are dipped in liquid nitrogen, which has nearly eliminated the damaging effect. Still, the technology isn’t perfect. At the Egg Freezing Center, an average procurement of 10 eggs gives a woman about a 50 percent chance of giving birth. But compare that to the odds 10 years ago, when doctors averaged about one birth for every 100 thaw-and-fertilize attempts. “As you can see, this is a critical scientific advancement,” Jain says.

While no formal international registry exists, industry experts estimate that fewer than 1,000 babies worldwide have been born from frozen eggs, with the first birth occurring just 22 years ago. Roughly 200 have been born in the United States, most within the past five years. Jain says the Egg Freezing Center has been responsible for 30 of those births between 2005 and 2008, and he expects that number to jump to 50 by the end of 2009.

Eggs are extracted using a needle, ▶

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which passes through the vagina to retrieve, on average, 10 specimens per procedure. Patients are under anesthesia, experience no pain and are usually checked in and out in under two hours. But for two weeks beforehand, mommies-to-be must endure daily hormone injections to the stomach, which they administer to themselves at home.

“That was freaky and weird,” says

Jenny Hirsch, a single 38-year-old patient of Jain’s, recalling one afternoon when she nearly missed her dose: “They have to be done at the same time every day. One time, I literally pulled into a Carl’s Jr. parking lot and here I am, sitting in my car mixing up these little drugs for my shot.” The hormone shots caused some bruising and a little bloating. Hirsch says the entire process was otherwise painless.

Most of Jain’s clients fall into the same category — mid to late 30s, sophisticated, highly educated, affluent and single. That profile fits Radcliffe perfectly. She explored egg freezing after a friend had the procedure done. “I just thought, ‘That’s it, oh my God! That’s what I want to do,’” says Radcliffe, a Manhattan Beach resident who wrestled with guilt pangs for letting time fly by without seriously contemplating the consequences of her work-all-the-time lifestyle. “I’m just now slowing down enough to realize life isn’t always going to be about my work. ... This felt like a safety net.”

On November 22, 2008, Jain extracted 15 eggs from Radcliffe. “And all of a sudden,” Radcliffe says with a sigh of relief, “I don’t have to worry about it anymore. If it’s another five years before I’m ready to have kids, that’s OK.”

And all of a sudden, this businesswoman did something businessmen have been doing for ages: She started dating younger partners. “Why not?” she says. “I still feel like I’m 22. I feel like I have all the time in the world.”

**BIOLOGICAL CLOCK SILENCED?**

**SO COULD THIS BE IT? HAS REPRODUCTIVE** technology finally advanced enough to — at long last — crush the biological clock? Perhaps Jain and the handful of experts in his industry are doing more than helping women become moms. Perhaps they are simultaneously leveling the dating-game playing field, putting women on equal footing with their male counterparts, who have always been able to become parents well into their 50s and beyond. Imagine: For a woman, no more rush to find Mr. Right before her proverbial expiration date. And for men, no more pressure to



**GETTING THE FACTS**

Dr. John Jain discusses the social implications of women no longer feeling bound by their biological clock with Jenny Hirsch, a 38-year-old single woman who had her eggs extracted and frozen after she broke up with a longtime boyfriend. Opposite: Patient Traci Radcliffe, 39, isn’t quite ready for kids and chose to have her eggs frozen by Jain.



“commit” when their ladylove reaches a certain age.

“Oh yes, it certainly will take the pressure off,” says Steve Santagati, a self-described serial dater who runs the website *Badboysfinishfirst.com* and is the author of *The Manual* (Crown), billed as a how-to guide for women who love dating commitment-phobic men. “I think it’s a smart thing for women to do.” It even gives women an answer for overly demanding parents who are anxious they may never see grandchildren, Santagati adds. “To any parent who says, ‘Where are my grandkids?’ she can say, ‘Listen, I have a backup plan. I can even go to a sperm bank and I’m all set.’”

But he warns it could also be a turn-off for some men who might see it as too self-sufficient, especially if it’s done by a woman who is financially independent. “It’s not fair, but it could be emasculating,” Santigati says. “Women don’t need men for money, to build a house, catch the food or now, even, to have a kid.”

But Nicholas Aretakis, author of *Ditching Mr. Wrong* (Next Stage Press), says the

advantages for women are too great to bother fretting over any dings to the male ego. “I think a guy who has his act together will respect the fact that a woman has taken control of her own destiny,” he says.

In fact, as Aretakis sees it, as more women opt for the procedure, stretching the biological clock has the potential to reduce divorce rates. It gives women the time to go out, be educated, conquer their careers, grow older and wiser ... then pick a suitable partner. And to do it like men can — without racing against the clock.

“Some women in that upper 30s, early 40s age range get into that baby panic and, frankly, start to compromise,” Aretakis says. “They know they’re not with the ideal guy, but they say, ‘I’m running out of time.’ And they just do it — have kids and then realize they married the wrong guy. And then they’re headed for a divorce.”

**WHAT HE SAYS**

“**IDEALLY, I’D STILL RATHER DO IT THE** old-fashioned way,” admits Travis Jabara, a 37-year-old businessman, single and deep into the Los Angeles dating scene.

“But maybe it does take some pressure off, so I’m not feeling like, ‘Yeah, I’ve got to jump into kids with this person right away.’ I know she’s got a backup plan.” For that reason, Jabara was supportive when Radcliffe, his close friend, confided she was having the procedure. “It caught me off guard,” he says. “I wasn’t aware it was something she was even thinking of. But I think it’s great. Hopefully, she won’t have to use them. But if it comes to that, I know she’ll be glad she did it.”

William Dorris, a Long Beach executive, says he’s all for egg freezing. “My last relationship ended because she wanted kids and I wasn’t ready,” says Dorris, 39. “We only dated about five months, then she had her 38th birthday coming and all of a sudden all she could talk about was ‘Where is this going? I need to know, I want kids someday.’ The pressure killed us. But what if she had this in her back pocket? Who knows, it could’ve helped.”

Still, because egg freezing is, for now, an uncommon choice, many men are unnerved by the concept. And when a dating partner admits she’s had it ►

done, the reactions aren't always pleasant, notes Hirsch, who had the procedure done last May, shortly after she broke up with a longtime boyfriend.

"I had this one guy say to me, 'Don't you think you're being kind of selfish? Do you really want to be 70 and chasing kids?'" Hirsch recalls. "Obviously, I wouldn't wait that long. Plus, we live so much longer these days, we're healthy much longer. And think of how many grandparents raise their grandchildren. I have this opportunity available to me, and I'm proud to take advantage of it."

### THE COST EFFECT

**SO IF EGG FREEZING IS SO EMPOWERING** for women, why aren't more ladies doing it? Because of the cost mainly. At \$15,000 per procurement, plus another \$600 a year for storage, egg freezing was almost out of reach for Hirsch, a fashion-industry consultant who, despite doing well for herself, didn't have that kind of money lying around. Then an \$8,000 federal tax refund check arrived in the mail. "And I told a friend who was with me at the time, 'Oh my God, I can freeze my eggs with this! Now I have enough!' My friend looked at me like I was crazy."

Dr. Marc Fritz, chair of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine,

still bluntly points out that ovarian egg freezing technology is too new to offer firm answers. It cannot guarantee an older woman a child. "Women still need to be aware of the way their fertility declines with age and consider this when plotting the courses of their lives and careers," he said in an American Society for Reproductive Medicine report on the pros and cons of elective egg freezing.

The report adds that live birth rates from eggs previously frozen are still "substantially lower than the live birth rate for embryos formed from freshly harvested eggs." But the report also states that there are no significant health risks to women who undergo the procedure. Although studies are still limited due to the newness of the technology, so far, babies born from frozen eggs are healthy and show no increased risk for congenital birth defects.

### GET USED TO IT

**AS TECHNOLOGY CONTINUES TO ADVANCE**, and good old-fashioned girl talk prompts more and more women to jump on board, ovarian egg freezing could become as common among women as Botox. In fact, Jain's already set to open new clinics in Chicago, New York and



**PLANNING AHEAD** Jenny Hirsch says that except for some slight bruising and a little bloating, the egg-removal process was painless.

Austin, Texas.

"This is the first generation of women raised to believe they can do whatever they want," Jain explains. "And they are out there doing it. Unfortunately, their eggs aren't going to wait." Well, unless they freeze them, he adds.

Hirsch reports that she's now found guys who are more comfortable with her decision. Her latest date — age 27, by the way — was even enthusiastic. "When I told him, he said, 'Oh my God, that's awesome,'" she says. But if Mr. Right still hasn't come along in another few years, she's already considered her next move. "Yes, I would have a baby alone," she says. "I'm going to be a great mom, so why not? I can do it. I can do anything." ●

## CHOOSING A DOCTOR

If you think ovarian egg freezing might be the right choice for you, know the key questions to ask. Dr. John Jain of the Egg Freezing Center in Santa Monica suggests the following:

**[1] How long has the facility been conducting egg extraction procedures? How many eggs have been**

**successfully thawed and fertilized?** "Just because a doctor can freeze eggs does not mean he or she is an expert at thawing or has experience with live births," Jain says.

**[2] How many frozen eggs does it take, on average, for the clinic to produce a live birth?** "Make sure you know how many eggs

the doctor wants you to freeze for an expectation of pregnancy," Jain says. "From about 20 eggs, you should have a very good chance of getting pregnant." Most specialized centers should have a 30 to 50 percent live-birth success rate per batch (of about 10) thawed eggs.

**[3] What is the total cost for shots, egg extraction**

**and storage? Will health insurance cover any costs?** Some insurers will provide benefits for the hormone injections, because the shots are the same as those used in fertility treatments. But egg extraction and storage will be out-of-pocket expenses. Average cost runs from \$12,000 to \$15,000 for extraction and from \$400 to \$600 per year for storage.

**[4] Has the doctor been published in reputable medical journals?** "If the doctor has been published on the topics of ovarian egg freezing, egg thawing and live birth rates, it means he or she is likely an expert in the field," Jain says.