

## Delaying fatherhood has risks, too

By Faye Flam

By the time I'd reached my early 30s and was still not married, someone offered me this bit of advice: Just pick somebody.

Women are relentlessly reminded of the dreaded biological clock and the risks of having children after 35. But recent science suggests men, too, should be worried.

"The term 'biological clock' has always referred to females, but now there's evidence men are also ticking off some of their healthy children," says Jay Schinfeld, a fertility specialist at Abington Reproductive Medicine.

The latest finding, published this month: Older fathers are more likely to have children with autism. Researchers tracked 387,000 people born in Israel and concluded the odds of fathering an autistic child are about 6 in 1,000 for men under 20. When a man reaches 50, those odds shoot up to about 52 in 1,000.

"The optimal time for a man to father a healthy child is the same as for a woman—25 or so," says Dolores Malaspina, a psychiatry professor at New York University and coauthor of the study.

Malaspina led an earlier study showing a connection between paternal age and schizophrenia. She found children born to fathers over 50 carried about three times the risk of developing schizophrenia as those born to fathers in their 20s.

Autism and schizophrenia both arise from a little-understood combination of genetic and environmental triggers. Both disorders tend to run in families, suggesting that genetic risk factors can be inherited.

But you don't have to carry a genetic disease to pass one on—he trouble can start in your testicles. There, sperm-generating cells divide about 23 times a year, in the process slowly accumulating copying errors.

Older fathers are more likely to have children with achondroplasia (dwarfism) and several other conditions caused by spelling errors in the DNA. So for a man, the older you get, the less your child's genetic endowment will resemble your own.

For women, aging isn't as likely to lead to spelling errors because we make no new eggs after we're born. But that leads to other problems. The million or so we begin life with die at a rate of about 30 a day, and as the remaining eggs age, they get less adept at one of their critical jobs—dividing their 46 chromosomes in half. Eggs don't do this until after they're penetrated by a sperm.

If they get it wrong, some will get extra chromosomes, others will miss one, leading to Down syndrome (an extra chromosome 21), Turner's syndrome (a missing X chromosome in a girl), and Klinefelter's syndrome (an extra X chromosome in a boy).

Menopause creates a natural cutoff for women's fertility around 50, while an increasing number of men much older than that are becoming fathers, or trying to, says Abington's Schinfeld. "We get some as old as 70 coming here to try to make babies," he says.

Some get married a second time to a younger woman and others find love late in life. Schinfeld said one of his patients, a Vietnam veteran in his 60s, came to him with a wife in her 30s. The man explained that during the war he'd rescued a group of villagers, including a little girl, and that girl tracked him down after she grew up. Despite the age difference, they fell in love and got married.

It's hard to say whether men will now be subject to pressure the way women are, or accused of "wanting it all."

Besides, the chances are still good that older parents can have a healthy child. And the fear of genetic defects has to be balanced with the hazard inherent in cutting short your search for a compatible mate. As a study out of Brandeis University concludes, "Spouses in poor marriages are more likely to be stressed... a finding that could mean a greater likelihood of strokes and heart disease."

So holding out for someone wonderful can jeopardize your fertility, but the "just pick someone" strategy could kill you.

Contact staff writer Faye Flam at 215-854-4977 or [fflam@phillynews.com](mailto:fflam@phillynews.com).