

Your choices about your remaining embryos

(The information below has been compiled by Fertility Network UK and adjusted by Leicester Fertility Centre to incorporate our own working practice)

Many patients are left with frozen embryos after finishing treatment, but often feel unprepared for this. If you have completed your family, or cannot have more treatment, you may need to make a decision about any remaining embryos.

When the embryos were frozen, you filled in a form giving your consent for them to be stored. At this point, you will have said how they could be used in the future, but you may not have expected that you would have any remaining embryos.

“All we were focused on was getting pregnant and having a baby. We were really pleased to have some embryos to freeze. We did not ever think there might be any left over. It was the last thing on our minds”

If you do have embryos remaining, there are a number of options clinic staff can discuss with you, and you will want to make sure you have time to think through your choices.

Saving embryos for future treatment

If you think you may want to use your frozen embryos in the future, you can choose to keep them in storage. You will need to pay for this, and there are time limits on how long you can store embryos, so you should think about when you will be ready to have a frozen embryo transfer.

Delaying your decision

Sometimes when patients cannot decide what to do with remaining embryos, they opt to leave them in storage. This can give you time to think, but you will need to make a decision eventually. If you are certain you do not want to use your embryos for treatment but are struggling to decide what to do with them, let your clinic know. You may find it helpful to have a session with the clinic counsellor to help you talk through your options.

“Our frozen embryos felt like our future children. It was hard to know what to do. We knew we couldn’t have more treatment, but we were ignoring it because it was too hard to talk about. We were keeping a window of having another child open although we knew in our hearts that wasn’t possible. We saw a counsellor and there were a lot of tears, but it helped us to bring it out in the open and talk about the choices”

Donating your embryos

You can choose to donate your embryos, either to another patient or to research or training, however, not every clinic has the facility for every option, so not every option for donation will necessarily be available.

If the clinic has a link with a research project, you may choose to donate the embryos to scientific research. Work like this uses embryos in their first days of development to help scientists understand more about fertility, miscarriage, and medical conditions. The embryos are not allowed to grow beyond 14 days, and by

donating them to research you may help improve treatment for other patients. If you are interested in donating your embryos to research, please ask your clinic about any research project available at the time and they will provide you with all the necessary information to help you decide if this is the right choice for you. If you wish to have counselling regarding this choice, your clinic can arrange this for you.

“It took us a while to make a decision, but we’d had such a difficult fertility journey before we finally had our children. We were given information about the research and donating felt like a positive step. Our embryos could be used to make things better for other people in the future.”

Another alternative may be to donate your embryos to your clinic for training. This helps clinic staff ensure they are up to date with the latest techniques in treatment so this will benefit other patients. You can specify your wishes separately for use in training in the event of your death or mental incapacitation. The member of staff taking consent would not be the same as the one using the samples in training to prevent conflict of interest.

Finally, you may choose to donate your embryos to others who are trying unsuccessfully to conceive and need both donor eggs and sperm. If you think this is something you may want to consider, you would have counselling first. It is similar to being an egg or sperm donor, so it is important you have had an opportunity to discuss all the implications of donation.

To be eligible to become an embryo donor, the egg provider must be aged between 18 and 35, and the sperm provider between 18 and 45, when the embryos were created. Please be aware additional screening tests are required as per the HFEA Code of Practice prior to donation. Both gamete providers need to be in agreement before exploring this option.

Removing the embryos from storage

The other option for your remaining embryos is to have them removed from storage. Once they are removed from the storage tank, they would thaw and would be left to perish.

Sometimes patients ask if they can take the embryos home to bury them, but this is not permissible, as per HFEA guidelines. You can still choose to have a ceremony to mark the occasion if you would like to.

“We had a choice of donating the embryos for training or to another couple, and neither of those felt right. In the end, we decided we’d let them perish. It wasn’t easy. I still always think about them on that day, but it was the right decision for us”

What happens if we don’t agree?

Sometimes couples find it had to come to a joint decision about what to do with remaining embryos. It is difficult if you feel differently about your choices. If you are struggling to agree, talking to our counsellor may help you to discuss this through with one another.

Remember: there are no right or wrong decisions about what to do with remaining embryos as this is a very personal decision. What is important is to make sure you have time to think about the options and to discuss them with staff at your clinic or a counsellor. It can be hard to have to make a decision, but the key to this is finding what feels right for you.

Further resources:

HFEA information on donating embryos: <https://www.hfea.gov.uk/donation/donors/donating-your-embryos>