

[IMAGE]

Assisted Reproduction: Know the Risks

Many couples experiencing difficulty having a child turn to assisted reproductive technology to combat infertility. Methods of assisted reproduction include in vitro fertilization, or assisted fertilization outside of the body, and individual sperm injections into the mother's egg. These are reported as safe, if not completely natural, ways to have a child, but research has not evaluated their risks. Are infants conceived using assisted reproduction more likely to suffer from birth defects than naturally conceived infants?

The prevalence of major birth defects in infants conceived with assisted reproduction was determined in this Western Australian study, published recently in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Between 1993 and 1997, the prevalence of major birth defects was calculated for three groups: approximately 300 infants conceived with sperm injection, over 800 conceived with in vitro fertilization, and 4,000 natural births.

Compared to natural births, the odds for a major birth defect were doubled for both groups of assisted-reproductive-technology infants. Also, infants conceived using reproductive technology were at a higher risk for multiple major birth defects, and defects in muscles, bones, and chromosomes. Assisted reproductive births were more likely to involve Cesarean section, pre-term birth, and low birth weight.

If you are contemplating assisted reproduction, consider all of the risks involved to yourself and the child before you elect to use the procedure. Weigh all the alternative options available, including adoption, and ask yourself: Is it worth the risks?

Reference:

Hansen M, Kurinczuk JJ, Bower C, et al. The risk of major birth defects after intracytoplasmic sperm injection and in vitro fertilization. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 2002;346(10), pp. 725-730.

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