



Options for remaining embryos in storage after fertility treatment

After fertility treatment such as IVF or ICSI, you may be left with some frozen embryos. If you have reached a point where your family is complete or you don't want more treatment, you may need to decide what you want to do with these embryos.

You may not have been expecting to have to make decisions about this, and it can feel complex and overwhelming. Clinic staff will be able to discuss the options available and help you think through your choices.

Why do I need to make a decision about this?

Fertility clinics can't keep embryos indefinitely, and you may be charged a fee every year to keep your embryos stored at the clinic. There are limits on storage times, and at a certain point, you will need to make a decision.

If your embryos were created with a partner, both of you must consent to any decision about their use or storage. If one person withdraws consent, the embryos cannot be used.

Fertility counselling is available through your clinic to support you in making decisions about your embryos.

Keeping embryos stored to use in the future

If you feel you may want to use your embryos for your own treatment in the future, you can continue to store them. You will have to pay annual fees to keep the embryos in storage at the clinic.

In the UK, embryos can be stored for up to 55 years from the date they were frozen. You will have to renew your consent for this every 10 years. It is important to make sure the clinic have your current contact details so they can contact you. If they can't get in touch with you to renew your consent, they will eventually have to remove the embryos from storage and allow them to perish.

Sometimes, people choose to keep embryos in storage because they are finding it hard to decide what to do with them. Extending the consent time can give you more time to think but can be expensive. It may help to remember that not all embryos are viable, and that not all embryos will implant.

"No one had ever really mentioned the possibility of having embryos left over. It felt to me like more potential babies being left at the clinic, frozen in time."

Donating your embryos

There are a number of different ways of donating embryos. Not every option will be available at every clinic, so you will need to discuss this with staff at your clinic.

- **Donating embryos to someone else**

You may decide to donate your embryos to help someone else who is going through fertility issues. This can feel a positive way of giving something back to help someone else to have a family.

“For us, it was the best option. It meant the embryos would have the opportunity to thrive. We know how devastating infertility can be, and this gave us a chance to help someone else.”

If this is something you want to think about, you will need counselling to talk through the implications of donating your embryos. Donation is not anonymous in the UK. This means any child born from the embryos would be able to find out your identity in the future.

“Giving my embryos to someone else felt to me like giving them up for adoption. I found it hard to get my head around that.”

Some people who hope to donate embryos find during the screening process, or for regulatory reasons, that this pathway is not possible. Counselling remains available before, during and following embryo donation, or if for any reason donation is not possible.

In some circumstances there may be implications for legal parenthood. If a single woman receives a donor embryo, the male partner of the couple donating the embryo may be considered the legal parent.

“We were so pleased our treatment had been successful, the hope of passing it forward. We had used a sperm donor in our treatment, and they had reached their ten-family limit. It was good to know others had shared success but made it more complicated when deciding what to do with our embryos.”

- **Donating embryos for research**

Embryos are used in research to help scientists understand more about fertility, miscarriage, genetic conditions and treatment options. This is another way of using spare embryos to help future fertility patients.

Research projects using embryos are very strictly regulated. Your embryos can only be used in projects which have been approved by the body which regulates fertility treatments in the UK, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). Embryos used for research are not allowed to develop beyond 14 days after they have been fertilised. Embryos used in research are not permitted to be put into a human womb.

“I liked the thought of the embryo helping to advance scientific knowledge for the future. I did spend a lot of time making the decision, but in the end, this felt the most positive way ahead for me.”

Not all clinics work with organisations facilitating research, but there is a list on the HFEA website. Finding out more and getting in touch enables you to confirm which projects will

welcome donations outside of their affiliated clinics.

(<https://www.hfea.gov.uk/donation/donors/donating-to-research/embryo-research-project-summaries/>)

- **Donating embryos for training**

Embryologists have to go through training as some of the techniques they use are complex. Fertility clinics can use spare embryos to help to train staff, so they are fully skilled in the latest techniques.

Donating your embryos for training is another way of helping future patients by giving training opportunities to the next generation of embryologists.

“The clinic had given us our family, and this was our way of giving something back to them.”

Removing embryos from storage

If you know you don't want to use your embryos, and donation doesn't feel right to you, you may choose to remove your embryos from storage. The clinic will be able to talk this through with you.

This involves removing the embryos from the storage tank. They are allowed to thaw and stop developing. Making a decision to remove embryos from storage can bring a sense of closure.

“We decided to remove our last embryo from storage. Letting it go was really hard because we'd invested so much in every embryo, but we knew we didn't want another baby. It took time to come to terms with it, but it was the right decision for us.”

You may wish to discuss with your clinic what options are available at this stage. You might want to hold your own memorial service, or the clinic may be able to arrange for you to take your embryos home once they are removed from storage.

When the embryologists remove the embryos from storage they will no longer be viable and will be unable to continue to develop or create a pregnancy. If the clinic can arrange for you to take your embryos home, the embryologist will hand them over in the plastic container they were frozen in. The embryos will be within a small volume of liquid within the plastic container and are microscopic and cannot be seen with the naked eye. You can bring in a small decorative box for the embryologist to put the embryo containers into; they can suggest the appropriate size for you.

Some clinics may also be able to provide support counselling sessions during your clinic visit before and/or after you collect the embryos. You can talk to your fertility clinic about this.

Making a decision can be tough

If you find that you are struggling with making a decision, this is perfectly normal. It isn't always easy and can feel very emotional. Many people will take time to come to a point where they feel comfortable with a decision. It is only human to experience doubts and uncertainty about this.

“Whatever you decide, be prepared to experience some emotions about it. It’s not going to be easy and that’s only normal.”

We don’t want the same thing

If you have a partner, the decision about spare embryos is a joint one. This can be challenging if your views differ. In these circumstances, fertility counselling is vital and available with your clinic and independently. It can help you to discuss your choices together, explore why you both feel the way you do and come to an understanding of each other’s point of view and ultimately make a decision.

Delaying the decision

For anyone going through treatment, embryos are precious and you may not be able to decide what you want to do right away. Allow yourself time to think through the options, to discuss this and to talk to clinic staff. Booking a session with the clinic counsellor or an independent fertility counsellor may be helpful. Fertility counsellors are experienced at supporting people making these decisions.

Delaying the decision can offer some peace of mind in the short term but may leave you feeling stuck as time passes.

You may need to pay the annual storage fee, and you will need to give your consent again every 10 years.

“I just didn’t know what to do. None of the options felt right. For now, paying is the best option, but I know at some point I will have to make a decision about this, and it almost feels as if the longer I leave it, the harder it is getting.”

What happens if you don’t do anything?

Sometimes, not making any decision may feel tempting, but remember that the clinic isn’t legally allowed to keep your embryos without your consent. If they can’t get in touch with you or if you don’t reply to them, eventually they will have to remove your embryos from storage when your consent runs out.

Remember:

- There are emotional implications with every option, and it is normal to have doubts and to feel uncertain.
- Give yourself space and time to think through the options.
- There is no one right answer to this. It’s all about what’s right for you.
- You are entitled to be offered counselling by your clinic to support your decision-making
- Talking to clinic staff and seeing a fertility counsellor will help. They are experienced at dealing with people making these decisions and can give you the information and emotional support you need.
- Your fertility journey is often something that stays with you, specialist fertility counsellors are there for you before, during and following your treatment.

Further resources:

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

Donating to Research <https://www.hfea.gov.uk/donation/donors/donating-to-research/>

Human Developmental Biology Initiative - Public dialogue on early human embryo research - <https://hdbi.org/public-dialogue>