



1 of 2. Vasectomy is popular in the UK — but more and more men now want a reversal Jessica Peterson/Getty Images/Rubberball



Rob Tapey and Stephanie Luckhurst Gabriel Szabo/Guzelian

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As second marriages account for 40 per cent of weddings, a growing number of couples want to turn back the fertility clock

With just over two months to go before the birth of her first child, Stephanie Luckhurst is nesting and hoarding the babygrows. The 39-year-old from Wakefield, West Yorkshire, says that her pregnancy has been pretty uneventful, in marked contrast to the lead-up to conception, which was complicated by a very modern difficulty.

With three children from a previous marriage, her husband Rob Tapey, 44, had a vasectomy after he and his first wife decided that their family was big enough. When he met Stephanie after his divorce, the couple decided that they didn't want more children. But, says Stephanie, "the body clock started ticking, we changed our minds and found ourselves faced with huge and expensive decisions".

For the Tapleys, the route to pregnancy involved two vasectomy reversal operations (the first was unsuccessful) at a total cost of almost £6,000 and months of emotional uncertainty. Yet theirs is an experience shared by a growing number of couples seeking to turn back the fertility clock, not all of whom achieve a happy ending.

According to the General Household Survey, more men in the UK (16 per cent) have had a vasectomy than in any other country. In this procedure, the tubes carrying semen are cut and tied off so that a man can have sex, produce semen and ejaculate but is incapable of fathering children. But with more than 132,000 divorces every year in the UK, and second marriages accounting for 40 per cent of weddings, "having the snip" is a decision that an increasing number of men live to regret.

Vasectomy reversals have been all but banned on the NHS since 2004, yet private clinics report that demand for the operation is soaring and has not fallen in the recession, even though it costs up to £3,000. At one of the country's busiest vasectomy reversal clinics, in Hartlepool, Dr Andrew Dawson now performs more than 500 of the procedures every year.

With so many men apparently changing their minds, what prompts them to opt for a vasectomy in the first place? Dr Dawson says one reason is simply that it is more accessible in the UK than elsewhere. A vasectomy is a simple operation that takes 20 minutes under local anaesthetic. Unlike reversal, it is usually available on the NHS.

"You can walk into your usual surgery and get referred to a local clinic almost immediately," says Dr Dawson. "We don't have the religious bias against vasectomies that is seen in Catholic countries across Europe, and it is accepted as an alternative means of contraception by many couples."

If the convenience and availability of the procedure are what appeal to men, then it is the practical and longer-term benefits that often lead female partners to persuade them to take the plunge.

Most surgeons say that the majority of their vasectomy patients come from couples in their mid to late thirties who have children already (or never wanted a family in the first place), for whom the contraceptive Pill or coil are unsuitable or undesirable choices.

“Women get to 35 and are advised to stop taking the Pill if they have been on it for years or simply don’t like the idea of pumping chemicals into their bodies any more,” says Dr Dawson. “There is this pressure for their partners to be modern men and take the burden of contraception on themselves.”

A vasectomy is perceived as having no downside — until there is a change of mind or a change of circumstances.

David Grant, 44, from Bedfordshire, had three children with his ex-wife before he agreed to a vasectomy five years ago. Six months later the couple separated and are now divorced.

“In retrospect I feel that there was a lot of coercion and guilt tied into my decision to have it done,” he says. “My ex-wife said she couldn’t bear to take the Pill again and that having our children had ruined her body, so the least I could do was to have this simple and painless op. I took her point and had it done without really considering the consequences.”

To surgeons, his story is not unusual. “It can be a delicate situation,” says Stephen Brown, consultant urologist at BMI The Alexandra Hospital in Cheadle, Cheshire. “Some men don’t want to rock the boat. Everyone knows that a lot of relationships fail, but they all assume it won’t happen to them.”

Only when it does and they go on to meet new partners who want children does the full impact hit home. Unlike vasectomy, a reversal is a tricky procedure that involves careful surgery lasting for up to two hours, to reconnect the sperm-carrying tubes. Men must rest and have no sex for four weeks afterwards.

Grant, now with a new partner, had a vasectomy reversal and says that he was surprised at the invasive nature of the operation, after which he was off work for a week and “hobbling around battered and bruised for days”. In about 90 per cent of cases the tubes are rejoined successfully, but having a baby is not the guaranteed end result.

The more time that elapses after a vasectomy, the lower the chances of success after reversal, with conception rates at about 55 per cent if the reversal is done within ten years but falling to 25 per cent if more time has passed.

“Surgeons may be able to repair a man’s plumbing very well, but there a small chance of sperm being covered in antibodies produced by the immune system that hinder conception,” says Dr Allan Pacey, a fertility expert.

Other complications are possible. When tubes have been cut, sperm has nowhere to go, which can cause blockages. “The longer a man leaves it before having a reversal, the greater the

likelihood that there will be a build-up of these blockages,” says Brown. “It then takes longer for things to clear.”

There are exceptional success stories — Dr Dawson cites one case in which a man’s reversal resulted in pregnancy 35 years after his vasectomy — but many are less fortunate. For the Tapleys there was the trauma of an initial failed reversal, then the further expense of a second attempt with microsurgery. Their baby boy is due on December 17.

“We were torn between taking the IVF route and having a second try,” says Stephanie. “Our budget was restricted, so it was a gamble.”

Many couples feel that the full consequences of a vasectomy were not made clear to them beforehand. Julie Hanson, 34, from Derbyshire, had postnatal depression after giving birth to her son five years ago. In a state of “shell shock” at her condition, her husband decided to have a vasectomy.

“It makes me sad that neither our GP nor the surgeon questioned his decision or advised him to wait,” she says.

For David Grant and his new partner, the future is equally uncertain. He was told by the surgeon who did the reversal that it had worked well, but a second opinion eight months later revealed that his sperm quality is low. IVF is one option, but it’s expensive and, he says, time is not on their side.

“Talking to men in a similar situation, there’s a sense that perhaps our ex-partners were trying to exert control in the relationship, as there is huge pressure to get the snip,” Grant says.

“I am full of regret. I look at my new partner, who desperately wants a child, and ask myself ‘what was I thinking?’”

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