

Ethical Treatment of Human Embryos in IVF

What type of entity is the human embryo?

- Sperm-egg membrane fusion results in the creation of a zygote (one-celled embryo).
- The defining feature of an embryo is organized, self-directed growth and development, which begins at the moment of sperm-egg membrane fusion.
- The behavior of the zygote is radically unlike that of either sperm or egg separately and is characteristic of a human organism. Thus, the scientific evidence supports the conclusion that a zygote is a human organism, i.e., a human being.¹
- Roughly a third of embryos formed in vitro will have life-limiting conditions where the zygote will not continue development to the point of blastocyst formation.² However, a short duration of embryo survival does not mean that the embryo did not exist.

Overview of current IVF practice

- The traditional process of IVF involves ovarian stimulation and egg retrieval; fertilization in vitro; embryo culture, grading, and selection; and embryo transfer.
- In traditional IVF, only “high-quality” embryos are implanted; embryos that are not implanted are either discarded or frozen.
- Cryopreservation is sometimes considered a life-sparing practice to preserve live embryos for future transfer. A 2020 study found that over 1.2 million embryos were then in storage freezers.³ However, older embryos may suffer some damage from freezing.⁴
- IVF results in increased risks to both the mother and fetus, including multifetal pregnancy, placental implantation disorders, hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, and stillbirth.

Recommendations for IVF practice

- The ethical treatment of human embryos in the IVF industry calls for limitations on what can and cannot be done with created embryos.
 - Some pro-life medical professionals reject IVF entirely because of its in vitro manipulation of young human life.
 - Other pro-life medical professionals could potentially accept a form of IVF that is life-sparing.
- Before any attempt at IVF, there should be counseling to provide complete informed consent regarding the facts of IVF, including efficiencies, risks, and ethical considerations.
- IVF does not treat the underlying pathology that leads to infertility; before attempting IVF, every effort should be made to diagnose and treat the underlying causes of infertility.⁵
- All human embryos deserve dignity and respect. Given the loss of embryos from freeze-thaw, AAPLOG discourages freezing of embryos.
- The number of eggs inseminated should be limited depending on the patient’s age and intended family planning.
- Selective reduction of embryos or fetuses for multifetal pregnancies should be discontinued.
- Deliberate destruction of embryos by any means is unethical.

For more information on the topic of Ethical Treatment of Human Embryos, please read the full Committee Opinion #12 with the same title, at www.AAPLOG.org.

References

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