

Toxic drugs used in IVF 'risk health of mothers and babies'

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PUBLISHED: 01:50, 14 May 2012 | **UPDATED:** 07:43, 14 May 2012

IVF procedures widely used in the UK are posing a 'serious health risk', healthcare experts have warned.

Clinics are using 'aggressive' practices that improve success rates but have led to treatments becoming one of the biggest causes of maternal deaths in England and Wales, they said.

There is increasing evidence that the most common treatment, which involves high doses of toxic drugs to stimulate increased egg production in the ovaries, causes abnormalities in embryos and can damage a mother's health.



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Warning: The use of high doses of toxic drugs to stimulate increased egg production could be a major cause of maternal deaths in England and Wales

Experts were told at a conference in Copenhagen that an alternative 'mild' treatment should be used instead of the more risky options common in the commercially driven UK market.

Professor Geeta Nargund, head of reproductive medicine at St George's Hospital in London, said that high-dose stimulation led to side-effects, including ovarian hyper-stimulation syndrome (OHSS), a potentially fatal illness.

She said: 'A recent confidential inquiry into maternal deaths in the UK showed that OHSS was now one of the biggest causes of maternal mortality in England and Wales.'

'There is no doubt that women subjected to this kind of stimulation are at serious health risk.'

Between 1991 and 2007 30,000 cases of OHSS were recorded in the UK. The syndrome can also cause kidney failure and shortness of breath.



Dangers: Ovarian hyper-stimulation syndrome - connected to IVF treatment - can be a potentially fatal illness

Professor Nargund said that the UK was trailing behind countries such as France, Holland and Belgium which used less toxic drugs to stimulate the ovaries.

This 'mild' technique leads to a lower pregnancy rate per cycle but has a quicker recovery time.

She said: 'If we continue with expensive, aggressive, old-fashioned IVF it will exclude too many from treatment. We could double the number of patients treated at no extra cost and the complications would be less.'

Professor Ian Cooke, chief executive of the Low Cost IVF Foundation and former president of the British Fertility Society, said: 'We are over-stimulating women, driving the cost up and the complications up.'

'The first aim should be to reduce complications.'

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