



No Buns in the Oven

Procreation is a natural instinct shared by the majority of human beings around the world. However, the lifestyle of the average person today compared to that of our Neanderthal brethren a couple of million years ago is quite different to say the least. Cavemen and women didn't smoke, they didn't drink alcohol, they never used cellphones and the only stress they experienced was the odd encounter with a sabre-toothed tiger. Our ancestors were hardly overweight and never wore tight designer underwear. Where am I going with all this? Well, it's these very factors that have resulted in the successful (albeit unfortunate) exponential growth of the world's population.

Fast forward to 2007 and the situation has changed dramatically. Male infertility is at an all-time high and, although quite a complex subject, it's affecting more and more men on a daily basis.

Being infertile as opposed to simply having a low sperm count are two different medical conditions. Both are the result of various factors that range from congenital defects to lifestyle and stress. Final diagnosis of both conditions can also take a long time as each variable needs to be ticked off to determine the actual cause of the condition, confirm the diagnosis and consider treatment solutions.

Celebrity chef, Gordon Ramsay, recently blamed the long hours spent in hot kitchens and the close proximity to ovens for his low sperm count. Is this just another publicity stunt from Ramsay or does his claim hit chefs where it really hurts?



There has been some speculation throughout the hospitality industry about the correlation between low sperm counts and chefs. Controversial celebrity chef, Gordon Ramsay, has only added fuel to the fire by claiming that his low sperm count is the result of having worked long hours in hot conditions. Gordon's first three children were conceived via IVF (in vitro fertilization) – a process whereby the female egg is fertilized by sperm outside the womb.

What makes Gordon's claim semi-viable is the fact that due to his recent lack of time in front of a hot stove (time spent promoting the F-Word TV series and other culinary projects); his wife Tana became pregnant with their fourth child from natural conception. Not exactly a pleasant thought, but could Gordon's sperm count have improved after he spent more time away from the kitchen and stove tops?

Trevor Boyd, head chef at the Sheraton says that the whole issue is load of rubbish. "How many chefs have worked in worse situations in the past but still managed to father children?" he asks. "I believe that the work has nothing to do with it and I'm sure that the older generation of chefs - who had things much worse than we do today - can back this up by showing us pictures of their families. Gordon Ramsay is just trying to sell more air time and books and making his name 'get out there' yet again. Any publicity is good publicity."

Rudi Liebenberg, executive chef at The Saxon agrees with Trevor. "Why the hell would you want to have more than two kids anyway if you are a chef?" Rudi exclaims. "I work long hours, some in front of the stove and some not. Before the birth of my son and my daughter, I could just look at my wife and she would fall pregnant. Believe me, I've spent a long time in the kitchen for many years. Look, you can drink and smoke as much as you like if you want to become infertile. However, in a situation like mine, the stove will make you fertile."



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Now before all you chefs reckon you're in the clear, it's important to remember that heat exposure can dramatically reduce the quality and quantity of sperm cells. This is why the testicles are outside the body in the scrotum rather than in the abdomen like the ovaries.



Fertility specialist, Dr Goolam Hassim Mohamed, says that prolonged exposure to heat can even result in permanent cases of low sperm count. "Chefs definitely fall into this category," he says. "To emphasise the damaging effects of heat exposure to sperm cells, an experiment was conducted whereby six doctors were asked to sit inside a hot bath for 30 minutes. Six months later, all six subjects still had extremely low sperm counts. Standing at a grill for a few hours everyday can be a major contributing factor among chefs. Sperm cells can be regenerated, it just depends on the actual temperature and time spent exposed to the heat source."

The issue of chefs being at risk of having low sperm counts as a result of working in hot environments is still not conclusive. Actually, it's not really that surprising. No one knows what a normal sperm count is but some estimate that it's around 20 million per/ml. The spanner in the works occurs when most doctors have had the experience of a man with a very low sperm

count (as little as 2-5 million per ml) fathering a pregnancy on his own, with no treatment. Men of proven fertility have sperm counts varying anywhere from 2 million to 300 million per ml. This obviously means that there is a significant variation in "fertile" sperm counts.

If this article has caused some interest (or concern) regarding your time spent in the kitchen or general health, we suggest that you consult your nearest fertility specialist or urologist for more information. 

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