



EP 028: The Donor Treatment Decision

This is the Fertile Mindset Podcast, where we explore all the emotional aspects of fertility to support you on your path to parenthood. My name is Sarah Holland. I'm the Fertile Mindset coach and a mother to two children after my own fertility challenges. I hope you find all the support and inspiration you need within this podcast, to carry you forward on your fertility journey towards your own successful outcome.

It's also my wish that through listening to these episodes, you rediscover how to enjoy life now and live it to the full while you wait for your baby.

Now let's begin today's episode.

Hello and welcome back to the Fertile Mindset Podcast.

Today I want to talk about an option that increasingly more people are considering or choosing to create or grow their families, and that is donor treatment.

Now, when we talk about donor treatment this includes sperm donor, egg donor, double donation which is both sperm and egg, embryo donation and embryo adoption. There are multiple reasons why donor treatment may be considered as an option, or be the only option to achieve pregnancy and give birth to a baby. There are several ways that donors can be sourced and selected, and also how and where the treatment can take place too.

When you add in the personal beliefs and concerns around donor treatment, as well as possible ethical issues, and it's easy to see how complex a decision it can be to take the step towards donor treatment.

In this episode I want to explore the journey to and through donor treatment, and I hope that you find it useful at whatever stage you are at. I'm going to draw on the 20 years of experience I've had supporting people considering or going through donor treatment, and share the challenges, concerns, and fears that I have often seen. Because I know this can be difficult information to come across yourself. You may not know anyone who has had donor treatment to conceive their baby, or you may feel that your own fears and concerns are completely unique to you. No one else has ever felt this way, and you may even think you are wrong to be having such thoughts. And I know it can then be a minefield to know how to work your way through this brand new and complex decision.

So, as well as sharing my own findings and knowledge around the real issues that crop up with donor treatment, I'm going to share ideas on how to work through your own challenges, find some clarity and make the best decision for you.

Because this is your decision. No one else can tell you whether or not donor treatment is right for you. It comes down to you, or you and your partner if you are in a relationship.

So let's first look at the various forms donor treatment and donor conception can take, and the thoughts and feelings that can be attached to these options and what might move you towards or away from it.

If you are exploring this option right now, you might find it helpful to have a pen and paper to hand while you listen, so you can write down anything that feels important to you to look into further or reflect on. Make notes as you listen to the first part of this podcast, and towards the end I'll be giving you some ideas of what to do with your notes and thoughts.

OK, so back to the different types of donor treatment.

First there is sperm donation. Now this is probably the one we are all most familiar with, as it's been happening for much longer than egg or embryo donation. Conceiving with donated sperm doesn't necessarily need to include medical treatment either, as some people may be able or happy to use at home insemination with donated sperm, although IUI, which is intrauterine insemination, or IVF are more likely to be used. Sperm donation is an option looked at by female same sex couples, single women wishing to be mothers, and also by heterosexual couples when there are male factor fertility issues. Whatever the reasons for donation, there are concerns that I've seen come up for many in that they're not sure which route to go down to find a donor. Do they ask a friend so that the donor is known and may take an active role in the child's life, or do they find a donor through a sperm bank or clinic? If you select an unknown donor, depending on where you live or where you access treatment if you travel to another country, there can be different rules on anonymity.

How you feel about anonymity is such a personal decision, and it can be hard, or impossible really, to know how your future child will feel of course. Will they want to know the identity of their donor, or will they be relieved this isn't an option. You are of course going to be deciding with your own outlook and feelings about this, and whatever your decision is, it will shape how you parent and maybe how your child then does feel about their genetic origins.

We all know that there is so much more to the make up of a child than purely the cells that were there at the start. There have been many debates about nature and nurture and what has the most significance in the development of a child and their emerging personality, their strengths, and behaviour, with the emphasis falling firmly on nurture – that is the influence on the child from its upbringing and the parents and people who are present in their life. It's also to be expected that children may have a curiosity about where they came from and therefore about the donor too. As someone who grew up without knowing much about my dad at all, and now watching my adopted son grow up and ask questions about his birth parents, I can see how this natural inquisitiveness is to be expected and not to be feared. It doesn't mean they love their parents any less, or anything else that would impact on your relationship and connection with your child. You have the opportunity to set the stage for your child and tell the story of how and why they were conceived through donor treatment. You get to decide how to tell your child, and tune into what your child needs, and only you will know how to do this best, and it will be so much easier and intuitive for you if you release any worry or stress around it. Which is why I believe it's so important to explore all the emotional elements of a donor journey, and do the work on you, your mind, and your feelings, before you make the decision, conceive and give birth to your baby, and then embark on the exciting journey of parenting them.

And the same is true of course for egg donor or embryo adoption conceived children. The donors could again be personally known to you or even family, or are selected via a clinic with all the possible variations in the information available about the donor.

There are an increasing number of women pursuing treatment with donated eggs now, and it can significantly lengthen the window they can conceive and give birth to a baby compared to using their own eggs. Despite egg donation now being a relatively common part of fertility treatment, you may still not know anyone personally with a donor conceived child. And whilst

you will find donor treatment available at many fertility clinics now, it could still feel like an overwhelming decision to make.

Many women have told me that they feel a sense of grief and loss when they think of turning to egg donor treatment. It feels like they're having to "give up" on their own eggs and the only option is something now that they never imagined themselves doing.

I think that recognising how big and new and different this feels is so important, and to take time to research, talk to people and generally 'normalise' this as a valid option. It's still up to you whether or not to go ahead with donor treatment, but the more knowledge and borrowed experience you can gain, the easier it will be to step into the idea and see whether it feels right for you or not.

A few weeks back I spoke to Sheila Lamb on the podcast, and she shared her own experience of conceiving a baby with a donor egg. She talked about the process leading up to the decision and treatment, right through to now where she's a mum to her little girl and how she talks to her about the way her life began. It's a lovely episode to listen to, and I've been told how useful it was to hear a real life story and a few years down the road too.

I know the same was true for me when we decided to look into adoption for our second child. Adoption is a topic to talk about another time, but that initial fact finding, researching, and feeling into the idea was very similar for us. I reached out to as many people as possible to have a coffee and talk to them about being an adoptive parent and what the whole process and experience was like, and I also spoke to a friend who was adopted herself as a baby. I had lots of questions for her too, and it really helped my understanding and helping us feel more able to make a good decision about adoption, which for us ultimately was to go ahead and apply to adopt. But as I said that's a topic for another time, and if you'd like it to talk around adoption more.

We are going to talk about embryo adoption here though. This can be an alternative to double donor, where both the egg and sperm are donated and then brought together to form embryos in the lab. With embryo donation these are usually embryos created by another's IVF treatment, which are no longer needed. I have known people feel more aligned to embryo adoption than egg, sperm, or double donor. They feel like the fact that they are able to give a chance to an embryo that has already been created, and also possibly from a treatment cycle that had a successful outcome, knowing that at least one baby has been born from the same genetic sources.

Others have told me that they feel more comfortable with embryo adoption than adoption of a baby or child. With embryo donation they have the opportunity to be pregnant and to carry and bond with their child for 9 months. They will give birth to their baby and be the first person to hold them and the only one to ever care for them. And indeed the same could be said for any donor treatment, and why it may be an option that feels more connected to how you imagined yourself having your babies – having the whole experience of pregnancy and birth.

I just want to make a mention here about what the next steps of donor treatment of any kind can be like after you have made the decision. We are focusing on the decision here today, because I think for many this can be the biggest obstacle, the thing that stops us moving forward – and I'll talk more about the actual worries and concerns of donor treatment in a moment. But I also wanted to acknowledge how daunting the action of actually going ahead can feel. You have the researching of clinics, perhaps in other countries. Finding out how donor selection works, going through the process of selection, doing any other research you need into the legal aspects of donor treatment, and then finally going ahead and starting treatment. This part can feel complex and overwhelming to many, so it is definitely worth doing the inner work first on if this is the right path for you, so you don't have the burden of

uncertainty hanging over you too. And also research and choose your clinic carefully, to find one that makes you feel really comfortable, heard and taken care of.

Then once you begin treatment you may find it is more straight forward than you expected, especially if you have been through IVF with your own eggs and your partner's sperm before. Switching one or both of these to donations can mean less appointments, less pressure, less medication, and procedures if you're using donor eggs or embryo adoption, and often a greater feeling of optimism and hope too. Once you move to donor treatment you may be told that your chances of success are much, much higher which can give you a great sense of wellbeing and peace of mind around the treatment.

Let's look at some of the thoughts, worries and concerns that can come up around donor treatment. Now this list isn't exhaustive, but is drawn from the many people I've spoken when they're at the point of making a decision. You may have your own concerns too and I'd be very surprised if I was able to cover them all within this podcast episode, as each of us are unique people, living our own unique lives, so do also take some time to listen to your inner voice. When you think of going down the route of donor conception, what does your heart and your head say? Try not to push down those voices and thoughts, and tell yourself you shouldn't be feeling that way. Bring them to the light, and allow yourself to explore them more fully. You may be surprised where it takes you!

OK, so here are some of the concerns I've heard around donor treatment.

I won't bond with the baby in the same way.

This is an understandable concern, especially after a long journey to get to this point. You want to know that once you are pregnant, you will feel at peace and looking forward to finally meeting your baby. We know there is a lot more to the mother-baby bond than genetics, in fact I'd argue that genetics have nothing to do with bonding and it's our thoughts that can make us feel connected or disconnected. So as I said, allow yourself to feel this, acknowledge it, and maybe grieve the loss of the genetic link to your baby and whatever that means to you. Having been through the process of welcoming and bonding with my babies twice – once after giving birth to a baby genetically related to me, and the next time with a 4 month old baby being handed to me in the foster carer's living room, I can say from my personal experience genetics had nothing to do with bonding. It was my thoughts, my preparation, and the nurturing of the bond before we even met that created it. The first time that was through pregnancy yoga, visualisation and talking to my baby during pregnancy. And with our adoption the bonding looked like gazing at photos of my baby, talking to his foster carers to get to know him, and sleeping with a teddy that was passed on to him before we met so he got to bond with and know me too.

There are so many opportunities to bond with your baby, however they come into your life.

The baby won't look like me, my partner, or either of us.

This is a common concern I hear, with parents wanting to be able to specify eye and hair colour, skin tone and height. You may also be able to specify the education level of the donor, or even their interests.

Now if you are a blonde haired, green eyed, tall person who is obsessed with sport, does this mean that by finding an exact match donor your baby will share all these characteristics? Of course not. Just ask my tall blond husband who comes from a family of shorter people with brown hair! It's understandable to want some control over these aspects, and your clinic will be able to advise how much you can know and choose. But ultimately how the baby looks is a mystery until they are born and then growing into the child and adult, they become who may be a perfect match to you, or may be their own completely unique person. And each of them has pretty special qualities, I think. I have been told that my

adopted son looks just like me and has my eyes, and he also has a natural ear for music which none of us have in our family. I love finding out more about him every day, as I do with my other child who is genetically related to me. All people, including our children, are complex and mysterious, and it's a great honour to be a part of their lives.

What do I tell my child about being donor conceived and when do I tell them?

As you do your own research around donor conception and work through all your worries and concerns, you may also find yourself becoming more comfortable with the idea of talking to your future child about it. After all, how are you supposed to explain something to a small child that you don't feel comfortable with or fully understand yourself? So as you research and reflect, keep in mind that you are doing this for your child too.

One of the first people I met who was having fertility treatment with donor sperm due to her husband's infertility, told me that she bought a book ready to read to her baby from day one. It was a story book written for children to explain how a donor helped them come into the world. There are many books available like this now, and I think this gives a wonderful opportunity to talk to your child in a natural way about their origins from day 1. They grow up knowing this part of their identity, without the need for a sit down talk and revelation of the truth, which has the potential to be deeply traumatic for the child. Just ask any child who was surprised to find out they were adopted or maybe accidentally found out. But of course, like all decisions in the way you bring up your child, it's up to you to decide what and when to tell your child.

I know there may be other concerns too around whether it feels right to use an anonymous donor and know that your child will not have access to information about their genetic background, or the opportunity to connect with the donor. Equally you may feel unsure about using a known donor or one that can be contacted later in the child's life. What if this isn't a positive experience for the child? What if you feel pushed out of the picture and they feel more of a connection to the donor than you?

I would encourage you to explore all the thoughts you have, however many there are. You may find it helpful to talk them through with your partner and see which concerns you share, or how you can provide a different perspective for each other. You may also want to talk to a friend or a therapist or coach. The decisions around donor treatment come up frequently in my Fertile Mindset sessions. You probably know that I use a technique called EFT or Tapping within these coaching and support sessions, and it helps to gain clarity on confusing or troubling thoughts. It's very difficult to make a good clear decision when your mind feels overwhelmed. Using tapping on each of the concerns or worries helps you to naturally release a hold on any that you really don't need, and instead replace the worry with a rational, supportive thought. We have great moments of clarity in these sessions, where something that felt complex and overwhelming, suddenly feels clear and manageable. So it's well worth doing this work on yourself before you make such an important decision.

If you are at the point of making a decision about donor treatment or are going ahead with treatment, maybe you're pregnant now even, or you're just at the very start of thinking about this as a possible option, I hope you've found listening to this episode useful. Please know that you are not alone in your thoughts and concerns. It is a big and important decision to make. And we don't have much precedence for it. It's our generation now that has this opportunity to bring babies into the world and into our families in ways we couldn't have even imagined just a few years ago. It's a wonderful opportunity for many people, but it doesn't make it the default next way to conceive your baby if you can't use your own eggs, sperm or both. Take ownership of the decision. Please don't feel forced into or away from it by other's or society's opinions. Ultimately this is your child and your life, and I hope this episode has given you the confidence to make a decision that is right for you.

There are many other conversations we could have around this topic. I'm thinking of adoption, becoming a parent as a single person, in a same sex relationship, or with a surrogate or co-parent. There's a myriad of ways to have a baby and create your family, and I'd love to explore them all with you within this podcast. I'm planning out the next few months of episodes right now, so if you have any requests or ideas please get in touch at mail@fertilemindset.com I'd love to know which fertility topics you would like discussed, and what you are in need of support with. And of course, if you're looking for more direct support through one-to-one sessions with me, do get in touch too at the same email mail@fertilemindset.com. Right now as I record this, I do have a couple of spaces so it would be lovely to hear from you if you'd like my support. If when you get in touch there is a wait list, I'll let you know how that works too and when you can expect sessions to become available again.

Thank you for joining me today and I look forward to speaking to you again next time.

Thank you for listening to the Fertile Mindset Podcast.

If the topics talked about here sounded like I was speaking directly to you and your thoughts, then I would really love to invite you into the Fertile Mindset Sanctuary.

This is my fertility support membership, where you can free yourself from stress, worry and any emotions that don't feel helpful, so you can then create a naturally supportive mindset, your Fertile Mindset.

In the Sanctuary I'll guide you through using the emotional healing technique I use at Fertile Mindset called EFT, and you'll soon be feeling less stressed and more joyful.

If you're not already in the Sanctuary, do come and join us now, starting with the BUD level of membership, which is completely free of charge.

Go to www.fertilemindset.com/sanctuary to join, and then watch the welcome class, which will give you a fast start into taking back control over the emotional side of your fertility.

I look forward to seeing you there, and at the next episode of the Fertile Mindset Podcast.