The desire for children, and awareness about the impact of age on female fertility

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INTRODUCTION

Postponing childbirth and a rising number of pregnancies in women over 35 years, have become increasingly common in Western countries. Delayed childbearing has become more socially acceptable and a lot of favourable media attention has been given to older mothers. Especially women with higher education tend to postpone pregnancy. The objective is to describe Finnish university students’ childbearing desires concerning childbearing, and awareness regarding the impact of age on female fertility.

METHODS

A national survey of Finnish university students in 2008. A questionnaire was sent to 9,967 Finnish undergraduate university students aged less than 35 years. Altogether, the questionnaire was answered by 1,864 men and 3,222 women. The overall response rate was 51 %.

The following questions concerning the impact of age on female fertility were adapted from the Swedish Fertility Awareness Questionnaire:

1. At what age is there a slight decrease in a woman’s ability to become pregnant?
2. At what age is there a marked decrease in a woman’s ability to become pregnant?
3. If a man and a woman regularly have unprotected intercourse during a period of one year, how high is the chance (%) that the woman will become pregnant if she is:
   a) 25 to 30 years old? b) 35 to 40 years old?

The slight fertility decrease was defined to be between the ages of 25 and 29 years and the marked decrease to be between the ages of 35 and 39 years. The chances of a woman conceiving at the age of 25 to 30 years or at the age of 35 to 40 years were defined to be 70 to 79 % and 50 to 59 %, respectively.

RESULTS

Of the respondents, 8 % had children, and 94 % wanted to have children in the future. The vast majority (94.0 %) desired to have children in the future.

Two-thirds of female students and 42 % of male students wanted their first child between the ages of 25 to 29 years.

Female students were more aware of the impact of age on female fertility than were male students. Over half of the men and approximately one-third of the women thought that the marked decrease in female fertility begins after the age of 45 years.

CONCLUSIONS

More than 9 in 10 university students wanted to have children in the future. Awareness among participants concerning the natural, age-related decline in female fertility, was insufficient. Particularly alarming is the lack of awareness among male students and younger respondents. Delaying childbirth based on incorrect perceptions of female fertility could lead to permanent involuntary childlessness. The prevention of infertility is as important as that of unwanted pregnancies. Informed choices about the timing of parenthood are possible only if people are fully aware of the risks of delayed childbearing. One task of health care personnel is to properly inform students of both genders about the effects of ageing on reproductive function.