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Transplanting of ovaries could sustain fertility

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OVARIAN tissue transplants could be used like egg freezing to preserve a woman's fertility into her 40s and 50s.

However, IVF specialists say they will only offer it to women whose fertility is threatened by illnesses such as cancer.

On Wednesday, Monash IVF announced it had preserved a Melbourne woman's fertility by taking ovarian tissue from her before she had breast cancer treatment in 2005, freezing it, and reimplanting it in her this year. The procedure allowed the 43-year-old woman's body to resume natural ovulation.

At six weeks pregnant, she is the 20th in the world and the first in Australia to achieve pregnancy with the groundbreaking technique.

While the procedure means menopause can be delayed or reversed, fertility experts said it was still too experimental to offer ovarian tissue freezing to women in their 20s and 30s who are not ready for pregnancy but want options in the future.

However, they said the technique, pioneered in Israel, offered hope to thousands of women with endometriosis and those at risk of early menopause. About one in 50 Australian women experience menopause before the age of 40 and about one in 10 women of reproductive age have endometriosis, a condition that can cause infertility.

The clinical director at Monash IVF, Dr Lynn Burmeister, said if women had surgery for endometriosis, their gynaecologist could take a small amount of ovarian tissue for freezing to give them the option of using it later in life. Women who have a strong family history of early menopause could also consider it.

"It could be a way of preserving their fertility. I've currently got an 18-year-old patient who is in menopause and occasionally we see it in women in their early 20s. It's devastating," said Dr Burmeister who is looking after the 43-year-old breast cancer survivor who last month became the first Australian woman to get pregnant through transplantation.

While some Australian women are paying about \$12,000 to freeze their eggs because they are not ready to have a baby and want options in future, leading IVF specialists said they would not recommend ovarian transplantation for the same reason.

Vice-president of the Fertility Society of Australia, Professor Michael Chapman, said although transplantation delayed menopause, there was no evidence yet that it could put menopause off indefinitely. The freezing process could also damage the quality of the eggs in the tissue. "The freezing and putting back process destroys most of the eggs with the current technology, but we've said that about a lot of things with IVF and the technology keeps getting better, so we'll be saying different things five years from now," he said.

Professor Chapman said the concept of young women having tissue frozen so it can be reimplanted for pregnancy in their late 40s and 50s had to be balanced against the risks of birth for women and their babies at such an age.

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IVF specialists say they will only offer the transplants to women whose fertility is threatened by illnesses such as cancer.

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