

I donated my eggs

Women have approximately 400,000 eggs stored in their ovaries after menstruation begins, ovulating one mature egg per month until menopause, actually losing 999 per month through attrition.

Two days before my 23rd birthday I donated 26 eggs to a couple I don't know and will never know. "But why?" As a donor, I wish I was better prepared to answer this question because describing your willingness to "sell" a piece of you is tough. I first heard of egg donation last year when my friend was researching it after hearing an ad on Spotify. When she told me about the monetary compensation I was intrigued and wary. What will I have to put myself through to receive \$5,000?

Then I thought about the couple. What have they gone through to try to conceive? Yes, there are many alternatives to in vitro fertilization (IVF), but I don't feel it's fair to criticize when I have never struggled with infertility. I have never experienced the financial hardship and physical burden that infertility comes with. I have never been told I cannot conceive—unless there is a donor egg. I so badly wanted to help someone experience all the tiny wonders of pregnancy because I would want someone to do the same for me.

I did some of my own research, passed the initial screening checklist (physically and psychologically healthy, nonsmoker, no STDs, etc...) and applied. I had to fill out an online form that required me to list my medical history and that of my siblings, parents and grandparents in length. I also had to describe myself—hobbies, characteristics, medication information and fertility history. I like to compare it to writing a resume. You strive to come across as accomplished, but still down-to-earth

without sounding like a total jackass. I noted in the application that my parents would call me a ham as a child because I figured the recipients would want to know what they were getting themselves into.

I also had to send photos. Side note: I didn't get out of my awkward stage until I was a senior in high school. I spent most of my childhood looking like a tiny bald man with soulless black eyes and later on, a cardigan-wearing little grandma with round glasses and short, permed hair. Thank you, Mom. So I thumbed through albums and selected photos that didn't make me look like I should have a pension or black tennis shoes with Velcro straps.

Soon after I got the call from a clinical medical social worker that wanted to meet me in person and discuss egg donation further. We met at posh café near my apartment and discussed womanly eggs over eggs benedict among men and women in suits and ties. She had my file laid out in front of her and expertly explained the entire process including the psychological testing and a bio-psycho-social medical evaluation that I would undergo. If doctors deemed me acceptable to enter the program, they would include my information in a database that recipients have access to. I learned a few days later that I was accepted, so I waited to be selected.

And I waited and waited and waited. Weeks had passed and I assumed my profile didn't stand out among all the others. Then while flipping channels one afternoon I came across a segment on CNN about infertility and in that same moment I got the call. I thought if this isn't a sign I don't know what is.

“I'm in.”

Before being selected I had mentioned my interest in the program to a handful of friends, my sisters and parents. Most responded with surprise and support, but my dad thought I went completely off the deep end. He didn't understand why I would do this to my body when there were potential risks involved. It would be his dream for my sisters and I to pop out an all-boy hockey team and he didn't want my egg donation to interfere with that. I had to break the news to him carefully. I stumbled through my reasoning to go through with it and he half jokingly replied, "I guess I won't meet my first grandchild." He insisted I meet with the gynecologist that birthed my sisters and I.

I realize now I did this a little backwards. I should have met with the gynecologist first, but fortunately I left his office feeling more confident in my decision than ever. He explained some research has *suggested* the fertility drugs I would take may increase my risk for developing ovarian cancer or ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome in which my ovaries would become swollen and painful, but the chances of these things happening were incredibly slim due to advances in medical technology and my overall good health. He concluded my visit saying, "I have no reason to tell you not to do this."

Next there was a physical examination, lots of blood testing and screening for infectious diseases. The medical staff gave me their stamp of approval and the female recipient's and my cycle were synchronized which took about a month. I thought of the female recipient as my teammate every time I took my prescribed birth control pill, "We got this." After I started my period I began the fertility drugs, which I injected myself. Yes, I had to give myself shots several days leading up to retrieval. It

was like a bizarre, personal science experiment. I would sit on my bed or the floor and fill the syringe with fertility drugs and water while tapping the syringe vigorously to remove any air bubbles. The injections were fairly easy, but the drugs themselves caused me to feel an unfamiliar weight on my pelvis. I imagined my ovaries were the size of oranges. It was like a faux pregnancy—no alcohol, stretchy pants and a bit hormonal.

During the two week time frame I was taking fertility drugs the program closely monitored the production of my eggs with transvaginal ultrasounds and blood draws several times. It was normal for me to fill those appointments with questions as my vagina was being probed. “What are you looking at?” “How are they doing?” “What’s that giant dark spot?” The giant dark spot was a cyst. The cyst had to be removed the next day in a city over two hours away.

I believe flexibility is key when donating. You are at the mercy of your ovarian oven. Sometimes harmless cysts pop up and sometimes your dosage of fertility drugs changes as your eggs develop. My ovaries were responding to the fertility drugs so well that the doctor cut the injections short and my retrieval date was pushed forward two days. I administered the last injection, which is kind of disturbingly named “trigger shot,” 36 hours before retrieval.

I entered the fertility center with an empty stomach, a bloated belly and my sister. I felt the eyes of the other patients in the waiting room on me. We sat among couples. They knew I wasn’t their donor. The medical staff took careful steps to ensure I never crossed paths with the recipient(s). I was summoned to the back where I undressed and slipped into traditional hospital getup. I wasn’t nervous or scared. I

was ready and at ease because the place was a well-oiled machine. There was a whirlwind of nurses, doctors and anesthesiologists hustling in and out of rooms sectioned off with thick curtains. After going over last minute paperwork and inserting an IV, a nurse guided me to the bathroom and then to the operating room.

Surprisingly, spreading my legs for medical professionals did not get easier over the course of my journey, so I laughed nervously and turned bashfully red as I put my feet in the stirrups in front of three female nurses. The anesthesiologist quickly leaned over the operating table and cheerfully said, “Just relax and have a nice nap!”

All 26 eggs were retrieved with two pokes of a needle to each side of my vaginal wall using a transvaginal ultrasound to guide. The doctor took my eggs and loaded them into a catheter. One hundred eggs can fit on the tip of a pencil. I was under anesthesia for about 10 minutes. The mature eggs were put in a petri dish and fertilized with the recipient’s husband’s sperm. The fertilized eggs are incubated for 120 hours. Blastocysts are formed after 120 hours. Two good blastocysts are transferred into the recipient’s uterus using a catheter. The remaining blastocysts are frozen to be used in case a pregnancy does not occur or if a pregnancy does occur, a subsequent try for a genetically matched sibling.

I woke up from the procedure feeling bloated and experiencing menstrual-like cramps. My sister watched as I ruthlessly ate as many saltine crackers as I could. The doctor popped in to ask how I was feeling then turned to my sister and asked when she would be donating. I told him she was too busy studying for medical school and he proclaimed, “They’ll love you!” We both laughed and my sister helped me slip back into my clothes after he left. Then I was free to go. That was it. The pain post

retrieval was minimal and I spent the next few days relaxing and waddling around the house.

A month has passed and I feel normal—mind and body. Some friends and family expressed some concerns that the process may be difficult emotionally, but I am overjoyed that I was able to donate. One afternoon I found myself crying because I was so happy to be a part of something so big, so impactful and hopeful that the retrieval was successful. The child or children that may be conceived as a result of my donation could inherit my thin skin, inability to not laugh at their own jokes and unpredictable adult acne. My only hope is that their parents love the hell out of

them. That's all I can do.