

Sperm washing

Sperm or semen washing is a procedure that has been developed for couples who wish to have a child, where the male partner is HIV-positive and the female is HIV-negative. The procedure reduces the risk of virus transmission both to the mother and to the unborn child.

Sperm washing rests on the premise that the virus is carried in the seminal fluid rather than in the sperm itself. The technique involves the separation of the sperm from the seminal fluid. The sperm is then used to artificially inseminate the woman via Intra-Uterine Insemination (IUI) when she is ovulating and most likely to become pregnant, or by In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF).

This technique was first used in Milan (Italy). It is now used across Europe and, so far, over one thousand women have undergone IVF with “washed” sperm. None of these women or their children have been infected by the virus. A recent study found that the risk of HIV transmission using sperm washing was close to none.

In Spain, sperm washing is performed for free in some autonomous regions such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, the Valencian Community or Andalusia, while in others it is carried out in private clinics. You can find further information on this issue in the Health Department of your autonomous region. If you decide to use this procedure, you will need to undergo counselling and be fully informed about the technique and the risks (though they are minimal) of HIV transmission. In any case, it is always best to be as fully informed as possible before making any decisions.

Generally, during the first visit both partners have a full sexual health screen, which includes an HIV test. Following these tests, a fertility assessment is performed. Over the following weeks a range of tests are carried out, including blood tests, magnetic resonance imaging, X-rays, etc. Analysing the results from all of these tests will help to determine whether IUI would be a realistic option for you or whether IVF would be more suitable. These preliminary studies can take several months.

Acceptance criteria

Together with the fertility tests previously mentioned, viral load and CD4 cell count tests are also needed to assess the suitability of the technique for the applicant couple. If the procedure goes ahead, the woman will be tested for HIV during the pregnancy. It is advisable that couples do not engage in unprotected sexual intercourse during the six months prior to entering the programme and throughout the pregnancy. Thus, the chances of HIV transmission will be reduced to the bare minimum. Furthermore, it is also advisable to avoid any other activity that may involve a greater risk of contracting HIV or other infections.