

Fund IVF and cut risky twin births, health chiefs told

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Fertility doctors have called for IVF to be fully funded on the NHS to reduce the rate of multiple births, which can lead to complications for women.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said state funding for fertility treatment was the most important factor in reducing rates of twin, triplet and higher-number births.

A report by the association found that countries with generous state funding for IVF, such as Sweden and Belgium, had reduced their multiple pregnancy rate to single figures. In Sweden, the rate is just under 5 per cent, compared with 11 per cent in Britain.

Pregnancies with multiple babies carry a much higher risk. Mothers have a greater chance of developing high blood pressure or gestational diabetes, of massive blood loss after birth and postnatal depression. There is a six-fold increase in the risk of a pre-term birth, which can lead to infant mortality and long-term mental and physical disabilities, including cerebral palsy.

The extra care needed for the health problems also increases the cost to the public purse. The cost to the NHS for a twin birth is 16 times higher than that of a single birth.

"Multiple pregnancy is the greatest avoidable risk of IVF," Tarek El-Toukhy, a consultant gynaecologist and lead author of the report, said. "The health and financial burden it places on women, families and the NHS cannot be overstated."

In Britain, fertility doctors tend to follow advice from their regulator to

only put one embryo back into the womb. The policy has cut rates of multiple births after fertility treatment from one in four to just over one in ten.

Success rates have not fallen, thanks to an improvement in embryo selection techniques. However, couples funding treatment themselves often want more than one embryo transferred because they believe that it boosts their chances, or want more than one child, but can only afford one cycle of treatment.

Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) in 2013 recommended government funding for three full cycles of IVF, but provision varies around the country. Some areas provide no funding at all and very few offer three. Six in ten IVF cycles in Britain are funded by patients.

A investigation by *The Times* last year revealed doctors' concerns about the pressures being put on the NHS by couples going abroad for cheaper IVF treatment and coming back with multiple pregnancies.

Aileen Feeney, chief executive of Fertility Network UK, a charity, said: "Multiple pregnancies in the UK, with their health risks to mother and baby and long-term costs to the NHS, will not fall until the government commits to funding the three full IVF cycles."

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesman pointed out that the multiple birth rate had fallen from 24 per cent in 2009.

He added: "The government has been clear that the NHS should provide access to IVF for all patients that meet the criteria set out in Nice guidance."