Everyday plastics plunge men into fertility crisis

Chemicals in sunscreen and clothing linked to low-quality sperm

Kat Lay Health Correspondent

Plastics have caused a sharp decline in fertility among men, leaving only one in four with "good" sperm, scientists say.

Chemicals called phthalates — found in plastics and products such as shower curtains, car dashboards and cleaning materials — can be breathed in, consumed or absorbed through the skin of pregnant women, inhibiting testosterone production in male foetuses, leading to sons with low sperm counts.

Other chemicals, known as PFCs and found in raincoats and non-stick pans, were also linked to poor-quality sperm.

Niels Jørgensen, associate professor at Rigshospital, Copenhagen, told the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology's conference in Lisbon that society should be "very worried" by studies showing falling sperm quality in men across Europe.

Men are taking longer to father a child, often with older women, and they increasingly need fertility treatment, he said. Researchers believe that at least some of the decline in birth rates in the western world may be attributable to lower sperm quality.

Professor Jørgensen advised that women should try to avoid cosmetics, and even warned of the risks of sunscreen, "because what you put on your skin, you absorb". He added: "Many of these chemicals may not do much harm individually ... but we are exposed to thousands of chemicals. If you want to apply some kind of precautionary principle I think we should try to reduce what we are exposed to."

Laboratory tests on sunscreen had shown an effect on semen quality, he added, saying: "With the knowledge we have — we have limited knowledge — if I was to advise my own family I would say, 'Don't use it.'"

From next month, France will be the first country to ban the use of tubes containing DEHP, a type of phthalate, in neonatal, paediatric and maternity units. Lipsticks used to contain phthalates, but they are no longer allowed in cosmetics under EU regulations.

Other studies have found that lifestyle factors could affect sperm. One showed that the more saturated fats a man ate, such as those found in butter and cheese, the lower his sperm count.

Another linked hours of television watching to lower quality sperm.

Professor Jørgensen said: "It is only approximately 25 per cent that have

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Mainly dry with sunny intervals, but a few showers in the north and east. Full forecast: page 60

Dinner tonight

Chinese asparagus and mushroom stir fry
I've eaten twice at Chinese Shikumen, a bright start at the new Dorsset Hotel in Shepherd's Bush, west London. Dim sum and duck was enjoyable but this stir fry was my favourite. Chinese asparagus looks like leafy flowering broccoli but is interchangeable with English asparagus. It goes surprisingly well with mushrooms; theirs are tiny and very pretty, while I made do with shiitake and button mushrooms. A distinctive Chinese flavour comes from garlic and ginger, oyster sauce, soy and a splash of sherry. Serve alone or with roast chicken, roast pork or basmati or both.

Serves 2

Prep 15 min
Cook 15 min
Ingredients: 200g button mushrooms; 50g shiitake mushrooms; 1 garlic clove; 6 small knob ginger; 250g British asparagus; 2 tbsp soy sauce; 2 tbsp oyster sauce; 2 tbsp Chinese wine or sherry; 4 tbsp water; 1 tsp cornflour; 

1 tbsp flavourless oil.

Wipe the mushrooms to remove dirt. Leave small shiitake whole and halve larger ones. grate or finely chop the garlic and ginger. Trim the woods. asparagus ends and cut into 3 pieces, approx 7cm each. Mix together the soy and oyster sauce, wine or sherry and cornflour, stirring as you go. Heat the oil in a wok, swirling it round until it is a medium heat. Add the garlic and ginger and keep on the move, cooking for about 15 seconds until aromatic. Add the asparagus, tossing it constantly for a couple of minutes before adding the mushrooms. Keep the food on the move for a further 20 seconds or so then add the soy bigas. Keep tossing as the asparagus shimmers and the mushrooms darken. Add the cornflour, stirring as you go. Thicken the juices turning them glossy, the food glossy. After a further 20 seconds or so, it's done. Yum. How does the

Lindsey Barchan

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really good semen quantity — that is shape and concentration of sperm.

Some 15 per cent had very poor quality sperm and "you would predict they would need some kind of fertility treatment to become fathers", he said. Another 27 per cent will be at risk of a prolonged waiting time to achieve pregnancy. Most men, he added, were in a "grey zone", where one parameter was just outside the normal range but on others less so.

Studies in Denmark have suggested that sperm counts today are 50 per cent lower than in the 1940s, and a study published in 1992 showed a 50 per cent decline in sperm quality worldwide in the past 50 years.

Richard Sharpe, from the University of Edinburgh, said that the proportion of young men with low sperm counts could have a "serious impact" on couples' fertility. He said:

"The issue is exacerbated by female age, so in the current scenario across Europe most women are waiting until their 30s to early 40s to try for kids, when their own fertility is declining. So even women having a baby at 25 with a low sperm count means that the very best they can expect is that it will take them time — but time is not on their side."

Allan Page, professor of andrology at the University of Sheffield, said he thought more proof was necessary before suggesting that pregnant women should avoid certain chemicals, but he noted an increase in male reproductive organ disorders in young men.

Chris Flower, of the Cosmetic Trolleys Association, said: "We can state categorically that cosmetic products are required by strict European law to be safe. Not to wear sunscreen is an outrageous piece of advice because we know the risks of sun damage, and to suggest that not using sun protection products is a good idea is a terrible thing to do."

Britain 'unable to sustain its welfare burden

Sam Coates, Jill Sherman

British accounts for 7 per cent of the world's welfare spending yet has 1 per cent of its population, George Osborne has revealed. Standing in for David Cameron at prime minister's questions, he said this level was "unsustainable". Afterwards aides conceded that the government's plans to cut £2billion from welfare would not reduce this percentage figure as it was made up largely by pensions, which are protected.

The chancellor told MPs: "We cannot carry on a completely unsustainable path, or we cannot continue to reform welfare so that we pay and we give the public a fair deal to those on welfare and indeed those who have paid for it."

At a think tank that he needs to find £4 billion in cuts within three years to keep his plans to reduce the deficit on track. The Social Market Foundation also said government deficit reduction plans were highly reliant on continued growth and faced significant risks due to poor UK productivity.