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Test Detects Genetically Defective Sperm

Standard Semen Tests Only Measure Motility

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NEW YORK -- Many couples who have trouble conceiving turn to fertility tests to help determine the problem.

For 12 years, Cindy and Mike Meisch tried to have children. It was especially frustrating because the standard fertility tests gave normal results for both of them.



"I had semen analysis a couple years before, and they said everything looked good and there should be no reason that you cannot have a child," Mike Meisch said.

The standard semen test counts sperm under the microscope, and measures their motility. But there can be another problem with sperm -- a problem Mike Meisch had -- that standard tests do not find.

"One out of every four guys that come into our offices to be studied may in fact have an abnormality that we can't fix," said Dr. Randy Morris, a reproductive endocrinologist.

About 25 percent of all male infertility may be due to damage in the sperm's genes, or DNA. Laboratory studies



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show these sperm appear to fertilize eggs normally, but the embryos they form don't survive in the uterus.

"And whatever that specific problem that arises is, we don't know, we can't see that part," Morris said. "We just know that they don't get pregnant."

But now, there's a test that can detect DNA damage in sperm. Samples are sent to this lab in South Dakota, where a laser beam and a fluorescent dye cause normal sperm to show up green. The reddish sperm have DNA damage.

"Usually an abnormal result is a very bad thing," Morris said.

Although doctors can't repair damaged DNA, they say that a bad result at least ends the frustration of not knowing the cause of infertility, and it also ends the high cost of fertility treatments that don't bypass sperm damage.

Fortunately, for the Meischs, the screening worked -- and they have a 3-D ultrasound of their soon-to-be baby boy.

"They are just thrilled," Morris said. "They are the only couple that we have so far with an abnormal test that has achieved pregnancy."

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