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says. "Men should know that there might be some problems for them, too."

Gavrilova's research found that daughters born to fathers in their late 40s or older live, on average, three years less than other women. She blames this sex-specific lifespan shortening on the X chromosome, which is only inherited by females. This inherited chromosome could be damaged by the effect of cell division on the quality of parental germ cells.

The mutation rate is much higher in males than in females meaning we can expect a much higher accumulation of DNA damage in paternal germ cells.

Also, the age of the father is the main factor determining the human spontaneous mutation rate. For women the estimated number of cell divisions between zygote and egg is 24 and this is independent of age. In men, however, the number of cell divisions between zygote and sperm is much larger. At age 13 the number of divisions needed to make sperm is 13 but, by the time a man turned 50, the number of cell divisions has increased to 800.

"Every cell division makes a copy of DNA," Gavrilova says. "And the same thing happens with the next division and this final copy is of less quality. This can introduce a slight risk of error in the genetic material of the new sperm. You can call it a kind of copy error."

"We have found then that there is an optimum age for fatherhood. Too young fathers is not good either. The optimal age for men to conceive children is 30 to 35."

Maybe, however, trends in most Western countries show that men, like women, are leaving parenthood until later in life. In the US there has been a 25 per cent increase in the birth rate for fathers aged 35 to 54 since 1980. In Australia, ABS figures show the median age of fathers was 30.2 in 1986, rising to 32.3 in 2001.

According to the Fertility Society of Australia, one in six couples has trouble conceiving.

Not all fertility problems are age-related, however. Infertility in men relates to their inability to produce healthy sperm.

The new research in the US suggests age could be a factor and this knowledge should refocus the late parenthood debate on the role of the father as well as the mother.

The study by the Centre for Children's Environmental Health Research showed when the subject's age increased from 22 to 80 there was a continuous reduction in sperm motility as well as semen volume. Among the 97 men studied, there was a 20 per cent decrease in semen volume in 50-year-olds compared with 30-year-olds.

The research results are no surprise to fertility expert Dr Anne Clark. She says 50 per cent of couples who come to fertility clinics looking for help do so because of male infertility.



"The man's part in this has been ignored," says Clark, medical director of Fertility First Centre for Reproductive Health in Sydney. "Women having babies in their late 30s tend to be married to men who are that age as well but all of the responsibility has been put on the woman. That is not correct. If she had a younger man she might be better off.

"Often it is not that women have wanted to wait until later in life to have a baby. It takes two to tango. We find in our practice that a woman is past her ideal fertile time but it is not her choice – it is just that her partner has taken that long to feel comfortable with being a father. It is a big issue as women who want babies younger either have to elect to be a solo parent with a sperm donor or hang out to be an older parent."

Falling sperm counts remain a worldwide concern. A recent British study of 7500 men showed the average sperm count fell in the past decade from 87 million sperm per millilitre of semen to 62 million. One could be forgiven for thinking this is just a mere drop in the vast fertility ocean. However, 50 years ago the normal sperm count was about 113 million – double what it is today. Pollution, pesticides and chemicals are believed to be to blame.

So what is a potential older dad to do to save his sperm? If going bush isn't an option, Clark suggests they should have an early sperm check, followed by "clean living and no recreational drugs". Sex, however, is OK.

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