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Are You as Fertile as You Look?

By TATIANA BONCOMPAGNI

FORTY may be the new 30, but try telling that to your ovaries.

With long brown hair and come-hither curves, Melissa Foss looks — and feels — fabulous at 41. “I’ve spent hours of my life and a lot of money making sure I was healthy, and that my hair was shiny, my teeth were white and my complexion clear,” said Ms. Foss, a magazine editor in New York City.

So when it came to conceiving a child with her husband, a marketing executive, Ms. Foss wasn’t at all worried. After all, she noted, those same traits of youth and beauty “are all the hallmarks of fertility.”

Fifteen unsuccessful rounds of in vitro fertilization later, Ms. Foss now realizes that appearances can be deceiving. “I’d based a lot of my self-worth on looking young and fertile, and to have that not be the case was really depressing and shocking,” she said. The couple are now trying to have a baby with the help of a surrogate and a donor egg.

Advances in beauty products and dermatology, not to mention manic devotion to [yoga](#), Pilates and other exercise obsessions, are making it possible for large numbers of women to look admirably younger than their years. But doctors fear that they are creating a widening disconnect between what women see in the mirror and what’s happening to their reproductive organs.

“Somewhere between 30 and 40 your internal organs are aging but you don’t feel it, and now you don’t even see it,” said Dr. Karyn Grossman, a dermatologist with practices in Manhattan and Santa Monica, Calif. “At least you used to get some visual feedback.” Dr. Grossman (who, it bears repeating, is a dermatologist, not a gynecologist) says she gets so many questions from patients about their biological clocks that she has two fertility specialists on speed dial for referrals.

“I watch what I eat, I don’t drink, I take extremely good care of myself, and I come from a very fertile family,” said Fruzsina Keehn, 45, a designer of high-end jewelry in San Francisco

and New York, who has tried to conceive with the help of in vitro fertilization eight times in the last two years. Later this month, she will try once again with a donor egg. “Everyone in my life told me how young I looked for my age,” she said. “I assumed it was the same on the inside as it was on the outside.”

The unreality is reinforced by Hollywood, much to the growing dismay of many obstetricians and gynecologists. Not only are stars in their 40s now celebrated as bona fide sex symbols (Julia Roberts, Halle Berry, Salma Hayek, the list goes on), but judging from media coverage, they seem to be reproducing like rabbits.

“All women see is celebrities over 40 getting pregnant,” lamented Shari Brasner, a New York obstetrician and gynecologist.

Just last month, Us magazine ran a list, “25 Stars Who Gave Birth After 40,” which amounted to a who’s who of glamour icons, from Brooke Shields to Madonna. The next week’s cover story had a radiantly smiling Jennifer Aniston (age 42 ½) with the headline “Trying for a Baby!”

And the fixation continues. In the last couple of weeks, media outlets from The Christian Post to celebritybaby.com have been breathlessly reporting that Ms. Aniston was showing signs of being pregnant. She wasn’t drinking at a recent party. Had stopped smoking. Was remarking to friends that she has been sick during a recent Hawaiian vacation.

Then there’s Ramona Singer, a cast member of the Bravo reality show “The Real Housewives of New York,” who allowed cameras to film her dashing into a bathroom to take an at-home **pregnancy test**, at age 54. When another cast member chided Ms. Singer for thinking she might be pregnant rather than menopausal, she replied that she still menstruated regularly. (Not a good indicator of fertility, doctors say.) “They all think they are more fertile than they are,” said Dr. Ingrid Rodi, an associate clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the David Geffen School of Medicine at U.C.L.A., who has a private practice in Santa Monica. “I have patients who say: ‘I’m 48 but everyone thinks I’m 38. Shouldn’t I be as fertile as a 38-year-old?’ ”

The answer is no. As a woman ages, the number of eggs in her ovaries, as well as the quality of those eggs, declines. By age 37, only 10,000 to 40,000 of the two million eggs a woman is born with remain, and a majority of those perish before ever being released, said Dr. Zev Rosenwaks, director of the Ronald O. Perelman and Claudia Cohen Center for Reproductive Medicine at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell and co-author of the fertility guide “A Baby At Last!”

While each woman's window of fertility is different (there have been rare cases of women conceiving naturally in their 50s), most doctors agree that by the time a woman is 40, her chances of getting pregnant each month are approximately 5 percent.

Ms. Aniston's well-publicized intentions to have children (she told *People* magazine in February, a week before her 42nd birthday, that she planned to have a baby one day) get under the skin not only of doctors but also of people like Judith Newman, author of "You Make Me Feel Like an Unnatural Woman," a memoir of her life as a "geezer parent" after conceiving [twins](#) at age 40 after years of fertility treatments.

"If Jennifer Aniston said, 'I want to have children by any means,' it would be fine, but I don't think she ever says that," said Ms. Newman, a journalist who recalls interviewing a well-known 40-something pop star who had just given birth to twins. "She kept insisting that she'd had them naturally. I wanted to reach over the table and throttle her."

A recent poll conducted by [BabyCenter.com](#), a parenting portal with an average of 25 million visitors a month worldwide, found that 74 percent of the poll's 1,900 respondents thought that looking and feeling good and being healthy over all was as important as biological age when trying to conceive.

"This is a myth, the connection between attractiveness and fertility," said Holly Finn, the author of "The Baby Chase," an e-book released this summer. Ms. Finn points to Greek mythological figures like Scylla, Lamia and Medusa who were all female, grotesque, destructive and, most tellingly, barren.

But being able to have babies as late as possible in life is one of today's pharmaceutical holy grails, or so posits the writer Ann Patchett in her recently released novel, "State of Wonder," in which an American doctor ventures into the Amazon to study the fictional Lakashi tribe, whose female members' eggs never age.

The subject of fertility plays a starring role in another new book this summer, Jennifer Weiner's novel "Then Came You," which centers on a polished New York publicist named India (43, but she tells everyone she's 38) who turns to surrogacy and an egg donor to have a baby with her billionaire husband.

Ms. Weiner says she was inspired to write the book after reading an article about a woman her age who was unable to carry a child and had turned to a surrogate — which took her by surprise. While pregnant with her second child at age 37, Ms. Weiner recalled seeing a form on which her doctor had checked the "advanced maternal age" box. "I thought: 'What are you talking about? Everyone is having babies at this age.' "

