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Having a Baby Is Expensive. For Some, the Cost Starts Before Birth.

Prospective parents in need of a sperm bank are paying much more as demand soars and supply declines

By *Rachel Wolfe* [Follow](#)

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Choosing an anonymous sperm donor has never been easy. But it used to be a lot cheaper.

New genetic screening and the reluctance of some would-be donors mean couples and single parents by choice have fewer options when they need help having children. And that help can be twice as expensive as it was before 2019: often upward of \$2,000 for what equates to a single attempt to become pregnant.

“We don’t actually know where the end of the demand is, because we can’t keep up,” says Mike Large, who helps oversee donation services at California Cryobank, one of the country’s largest sperm banks.

Sperm banks and fertility experts, in light of broader acceptance of nonheterosexual parenting arrangements, say they are seeing more clients looking to use donor DNA. LGBTQ couples make up 60% of California Cryobank’s clients, and single women make up 20%. Brown Fertility, based in Jacksonville, Fla., now works with around 4,000 patients seeking donor sperm a year, up from closer to 2,000 before the pandemic.

As demand has surged, supply has plummeted. Sperm-bank executives say they haven’t caught up after a pause in donations during Covid-19’s peak. In addition, facilities say they are rejecting more applicants with certain risk factors as genetic and psychological screening techniques have improved. Seattle Sperm Bank, another large center, now tests for 514 conditions, up from 175 a few years ago.



Julia and Abbie Ensign and their son, Harbor. PHOTO: JULIA ENSIGN

A discouraging factor is the prevalence of low-cost DNA tests, which have the potential to dissuade those who don't like the idea of being found. California Cryobank and Seattle Sperm Bank require donors to leave contact info for children to access when they turn 18. The banks say some have decided against donating after learning of the requirement.

Clients of California Cryobank now have about 300 different donors to choose from, down from 550 in 2019.

"We used to staple a flier to a telephone pole at a college campus," Large says of efforts to attract donors. "Now, we spend millions of dollars a year on digital advertising." The company operates booths at Los Angeles Galaxy professional soccer games to try to raise its cool factor and increase donor diversity.

California Cryobank pays donors up to \$1,500 a month, and more recently started giving out additional payments during the screening process.

Prices for the company's most popular vials have nearly doubled to \$1,895, up from around \$1,000 in 2021. Shipping, freezer storage and subscriptions to view the virtual donor catalog cost clients hundreds of dollars more.

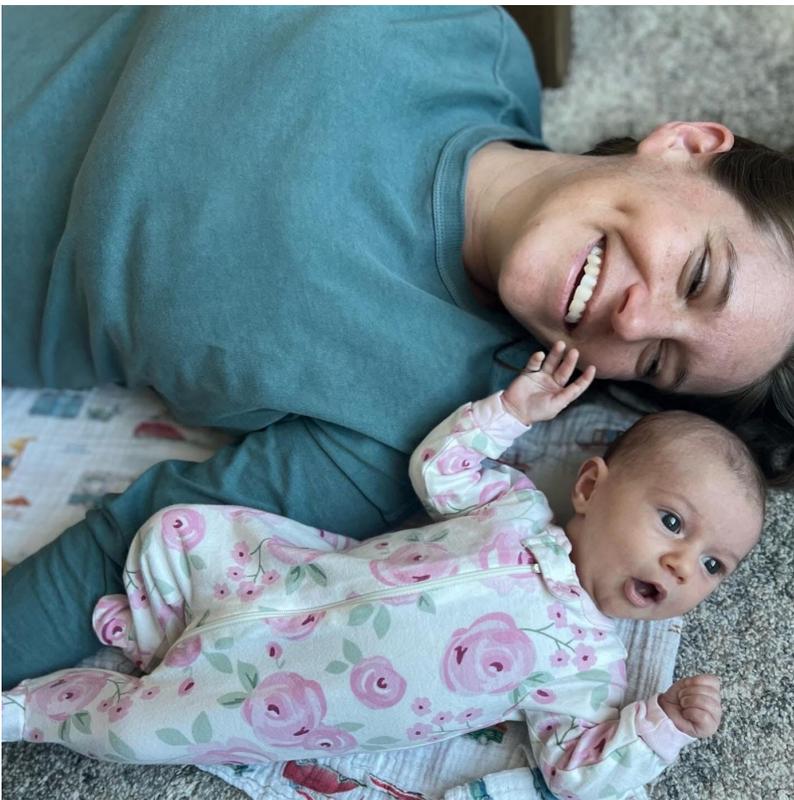
Some states now require that insurance plans cover infertility treatment, but donor sperm and its associated costs are hardly ever included, fertility doctors say.

Sperm bank alternatives

There are few easy workarounds to going through a donor bank.

When asking a friend or family member, in what is known as directed, or known, donation, couples and single moms must shoulder the cost of medical and genetic testing alone. They must also hire lawyers to write up parental-rights contracts. Dr. Iris Insogna of the Columbia University Fertility Center says this method is a less popular option as a result.

Ilana Cliffer, a Harvard postdoctoral researcher, says she initially considered asking a male friend to be a donor after she found out how much a single unit of sperm would cost. But her best bet had recently moved across the world.



Ilana Cliffer with her daughter, Zazi. PHOTO: ILANA CLIFFER

She next turned to an app that matches people seeking donors with prospective men, for a monthly fee. She says she was inundated with crude offers to have sex.

“It was the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen,” Cliffer says.

Cliffer, 37 years old, ended up paying about \$5,000 for the recommended four vials from California Cryobank. She says she made the purchase more quickly than planned after receiving a message from the bank: “Sperm prices are going up in a week, so you’d better buy now.”

She is thrilled with the result: Her 7-month-old daughter, Zazi.

Second job

Tiffanie Williams went straight to the sperm banks. She had to find a second job and took out a \$20,000 loan to help pay for the conception process for her twin boys. The Jacksonville, Fla., therapist opted for in vitro fertilization after two failed attempts at a medical insertion process known as intrauterine insemination, or IUI. She spent \$1,290 including shipping on two vials of sperm from Fairfax Cryobank.

She was disappointed that the four banks she considered only had a handful of Black donors in their respective catalogs.

Overwhelmed at the prospect of expanding her search on her own, she decided to host a “sip and pick,” inviting six of her college sorority sisters to come over with their laptops and help her choose from several different donor bank sites. She supplied sparkling wine, and they supplied the push she needed to select a donor.



Tiffanie Williams with her twin boys, Levi and Leighton. PHOTO: BLUE FRANSWA

To cut costs, Julia and Abbie Ensign skipped the doctor’s office in favor of mailing a box to their doorstep.

“We wanted to spend as little as we could,” says 27-year-old Abbie, adding that insurance didn’t cover the process. Their only costs were two \$1,600 vials of Fairfax Cryobank sperm and a \$129 at-home insemination kit.

The couple, social-media content creators in Salt Lake City, succeeded in conceiving their son, Harbor, now 2 years old, on their second try.

Frantic search

The scarcity of sperm donors can mean prospects, especially those who are nonwhite or exceptionally intelligent or athletic, are in particularly high demand. Some banks cap purchases after a certain number of families have bought vials from a single donor.



Claire Wasserman and Ashley Louise are expecting twins. PHOTO: CLAIRE WASSERMAN

After months agonizing over the choice—including upgrading to a \$275 premium California Cryobank subscription—Claire Wasserman and Ashley Louise finally agreed on a donor.

The next time donations became available, the Los Angeles couple frantically tried to check out what they could find online, only for the sperm bank’s app to crash and the supply to dwindle before they could log back in.

“It was like buying Taylor Swift tickets,” says Louise, co-founder with her wife, Wasserman, of a career-development organization, Ladies Get Paid.

Though they eventually procured vials, their first two attempts at IUI didn’t take. After more than \$11,000 on donor sperm and fertility treatments, the couple finally got the news that they were hoping for. They are expecting twins.

They say they won't go through the expensive and exhausting process again. "We are done," Louise says.

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