Impact of age on semen parameters in male partners of infertile couples in a rural tertiary care center of central India: A cross-sectional study

Naina Kumar M.D., Amit K Singh M.D., Ajay R Choudhari M.D.

Abstract

Background: High rates of sub-fertility and adverse pregnancy outcomes were seen after age 40. In contrast to oogenesis, spermatogenesis continues in elderly men.

Objective: To retrospectively study the impact of aging on semen parameters in male partners of infertile couples in the rural area of developing country over 10 years and to find out whether aging affects male factor fertility and various semen parameters in this part of developing country.

Materials and Methods: In this cross sectional study, the laboratory semen analysis records of 1219 male partners of infertile couples of a rural tertiary care center of Central India in a 10-year period from January 2005 to December 2014 were evaluated into 5 groups based on men age: Group 1: 21-28 yr (n=57); group 2: 29-35 yr (n=450); group 3: 36-42 yr (n=532); group 4: 43-49 yr (n=165), and group 5: 50-60 yr (n=15). Evaluation of all semen parameters were done according to WHO standard criteria (1999).

Results: The analysis of semen records revealed the significant negative association of semen volume, total sperm count, sperm motility, and morphology with age. There was a significant fall in total sperm count, sperm motility, and morphology after the age of 35 yr.

Conclusion: Age has significant negative effect on semen volume, total sperm count, and sperm motility and morphology in this region of India.

Key words: Fertility, Infertility, Semen analysis, Sperm, Sperm motility.

Introduction

Infertility is defined by failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse (1, 2). Males alone contribute 35-40% of infertile cases (3-5). Pathogenesis is multifactorial, any alteration to normal physiology of reproductive organs may affect sperm functions resulting in oligozoospermia (low sperm count), asthenozoospermia (loss of motility), teratozoospermia (abnormal morphology), azoospermia (sperms absence in ejaculation), oligoasthenoteratozoospermia that causes problem for successful fertilization (3, 6).

Males can contribute to conception even after 40 yr of sexual maturity (7). However, with aging degenerative changes occur in germinal epithelium, leading to fall in number, and functions of Leydig cells, thereby affecting spermatogenesis through a decrease in testosterone level (8-10). All these changes start occurring at an age of 30 yr (11). Despite these changes, the threshold age of sperm production is yet to be defined (12, 13). Semen quality has been commonly regarded as a measure of male fecundity, and changes in semen quality can occur after exposure to toxic agents or from host factor such as age (14, 15). Studies suggest that age is associated with diminished semen volume, sperm motility and/or sperm morphology, however; sperm concentration is minimally affected (16-18).

Hence, in the present study semen parameters of male partners of infertile couples were analyzed with reference to paternal age, so as to have an idea about the effect of aging on semen parameters.

Materials and methods

In this cross sectional study, the laboratory semen analysis records of 1219 male partners of infertile couples referred to the department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Biology Unit of the Physiology department of rural tertiary care center of...
Central India in a 10-year period from January 2005 to December 2014 were evaluated into 5 groups based on men age: Group 1: 21-28 yr (n=57); group 2: 29-35 yr (n=450); group 3: 36-42 yr (n=532); group 4: 43-49 yr (n=165), and group 5: 50-60 yr (n=15). The comparison of all semen parameters was then done following WHO standard criteria (19).

**Study subjects**

All male partners of infertile couples (infertility due to female factor/male factor/combination of two or unknown reasons) between the age group 20-60 yr were considered as study subjects who visited the gynecology department with complaints of not able to conceive since last more than one year of unprotected sexual intercourse. There were no specified inclusion or exclusion criteria, except for the age of male partner, as the data were collected retrospectively from the records. Male partners more than 60 yr were not considered for the study.

**Sample collection and semen analysis**

Semen samples were collected by masturbation into wide mouth plastic container, in a closed room in the laboratory of Reproductive Biology unit of Department of Physiology. The patients were advised to keep abstinence of around 3-4 days. Samples were then analyzed within 30-60 min, after liquefaction at 37°C. Semen parameters like semen volume, total sperm count, the percentage of motile and morphologically normal spermatozoa were analyzed along with the presence of pus cells in semen according to WHO criteria (19). For better confirmation of results, the findings were verified by the second observer also, before giving the final report.

**Ethical consideration**

The study was conducted after proper ethical clearance from the Institutional Ethical Committee and all attempts were made not to disclose the identity of any of the patients. As it was a retrospective study, so no written or oral consent could be obtained from the participants.

**Statistical analysis**

Statistical analysis of result was done using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 20.0, SPSS Inc, Chicago, Illinois, USA (SPSS). Quantitative variables were compared using unpaired t-test/Mann-Whitney test and all the data were expressed as means±SE or percentage. Pearson's correlation was applied to find out significant changes between age and various semen parameters and p value <0.05 was considered as significant.

**Results**

The review of 1219 semen analysis of male partners of infertile couples showed different ranges of mean volume from 2.86±1.33 to 1.73±1.09, total sperm count 144.28±137.95 to 61.03±91.13 million, total progressive motility 47.47%±25.43 to 31.33%±23.87, and percentage of normal sperm cells (morphology) between 26.05%±13.26 to 19.73%±14.46. As compared to WHO criteria (19), 30.84% of samples showed below standard criteria of various semen parameters. The mean±SE values of all the semen parameters in different age groups are represented in Table I.

The mean values of semen volume revealed a steady decline with increasing age. Similar negative effect of aging was noted on mean values of total sperm count, total progressive sperm motility (grade a+b), and normal sperm morphology. The maximum fall in all the semen parameters (semen volume, total sperm count, total progressive motility, and morphology) was noted after 35 yr of age as depicted in figure 1. Pearson’s correlation was applied to find out significant changes between age and semen parameters. Semen volume (r=-0.922, p=0.026), total sperm count (r=-0.93, p=0.021), motility (r=-0.95, p=0.013), and sperm morphology (r=-0.938, p=0.018) were found to be negatively correlated with increasing age, as depicted in figure 1.

**Table I. Effect of aging on semen parameters in different age groups**

| Age group (years) | No. of subjects (n) | Volume (ml) | Total Sperm count (million) | Motility (Grade a+b) (%) | Morphology (%) |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| 21-28             | 57                  | 2.86±1.33 [1-6] | 144.28±137.95 [0.2-414] | 47.47±25.45 [0-88] | 26.05±13.26 [0-49] |
| 29-35             | 450                 | 2.74±1.48 [0.2-8] | 149.46±173.72 [0.1-1358] | 48.14±30.39 [0-95] | 24.8±15.66 [0-55] |
| 36-42             | 532                 | 2.48±1.50 [0.4-10.5] | 120.41±156.68 [0.2-949] | 40.0±27.14 [0-83] | 23.07±15.93 [0-56] |
| 43-49             | 165                 | 2.44±1.37 [0.1-8] | 112.33±142.74 [0.2-776] | 33.12±25.06 [0-84] | 22.99±16.47 [0-60] |
| 50-60             | 15                  | 1.73±1.09 [0.5-4.5] | 61.03±91.13 [0.1-328.5] | 31.33±23.87 [0-59] | 19.73±14.46 [0-37] |
Semen parameters with aging

Discussion

The present study clearly reveals that age has a significant negative effect on semen volume, total sperm count, sperm motility, and morphology. It is well known that maternal aging contributes significantly to human infertility, whereas males continue to produce sperms even at advanced age, allowing them to reproduce during senescence (20, 21). Although very little is known, paternal age may also contribute to human infertility. In 1969, Sasano and Ichijo first described the decrease in sperm concentration as men age and found that 90% of seminiferous tubules in men between 20-30 yr of age contained spermatids, whereas 50% of seminiferous tubules of men between 40-50 yr had spermatids (22). Only 10% of seminiferous tubules from men aged >80 years contained spermatids (22).

Similar to our study results, a literature review on the association between male age and semen quality which compared 30-year-old men to 50-year-old men found decrease in semen volume (3-22%), sperm motility (3-37%), and percent of normal sperm (4-18%), but on contrary to our findings, they found that the age has no effect on sperm concentration (23). Similar results were also observed in another study that evaluated men between 22-80 yr of age (18). Many recent studies also reveal that sperm quality in men decreases with age (21, 24-28). In addition, advanced paternal age has been implicated in an increased frequency of miscarriages, autosomal dominant disorders, aneuploidies, and other diseases (24, 29-34).

Further in a study of 8515 planned pregnancies (of greater than 24 wk gestation), it was observed that men older than 35 yr had half the chance of fathering a child within 12 months compared with men aged less than 25 yr (35). Moreover various retrospective studies in the USA, China and India showed age related effects in semen parameters following the WHO guideline (23, 27, 36). In general, retrospective data implies declined sperm counts through ages (37, 38).
Our study revealed a declining trend in total sperm counts with aging, this is similar to many studies which indicate fall in all the semen parameters with advancing male age (18, 23, 39). There are many studies that also reveal either increase or even decrease in sperm concentration with aging. For example, a study reported a decrease in sperm concentration of up to 3.3% per year of age (40). Another study including 1283 men, who cryo-banked sperm prior to vasectomy, sperm concentrations were found to be lower at both extremes of age as compared to men aged 26-45 yr (41). Contrary to this, a study comprising of 22,759 infertile men in Northeastern Spain revealed a statistically significant increase in the sperm concentration of 0.7% per year of age. This amounts to an increase in the concentration of 14% over a 20-year period (42).

In contrast to concentration, several study results support the finding that sperm motility decreases with advancing age. Our study also observed a significant fall in sperm motility with aging. Several other studies reported a statistically significant reduction in motility by 0.17-0.6% per year with aging resulting in 3-12% fall in motility over 20 yr (40, 41). Moreover, a recent study revealed that sperm motility decreases by 0.8% per year of age and linear motion decreases by 0.2% per year (43).

In addition to motility, morphology also appears to be affected with increasing male age. The present study also revealed a decline in sperm morphology with age. Similar results were found in studies that indicate a decline in normal sperm morphology of 0.2-0.9% per year of age, resulting in a 4-18% decrease in normal morphology over a 20-year period (40, 42). This was further supported by studies conducted in various parts of India that revealed diminished sperm quality with age (36, 44).

Moreover, our study showed fall in semen volume with age, which is supported by evidence which suggests that there is a mild decrease in seminal volume with increasing age, although the clinical significance of this finding is marginal (45). The decrease in volume may be related to seminal vesicle insufficiency because seminal vesicle fluid composes most of the ejaculate volume (23, 46). Most of the data suggested that the pronounced changes occur in men aged >45 yr. Semen volume declines from a mean of 2.80 ml in those aged 45-47.8 yr to 1.95 ml in men more than 56.6 yr (18, 47). Table II depicts various study results revealing the effect of aging on semen parameters which support our study results.

Hence, understanding the impact of male age on fertility has become increasingly salient in public health as growing number of men are choosing to have children at an older age (17) and many couples need an assisted reproduction procedure to have a child (55, 56).

Table II. Various studies depicting effect of age on semen parameters

| Studies                  | No. of subjects | Significant findings                                                                 |
|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Levitas et al 2007 (48)  | 6022            | Excellent semen quality at the age of 30-35 years, Sharp reduction in all parameters after 55 years |
| Cardona Maya et al 2009 (49) | 1364          | The decrease in semen volume, motility, sperm concentration, with increasing age       |
| Harris et al 2011 (45)   | Review          | Age related decline in fertility rate and an increase in DNA breakdown in sperms      |
| Silva et al 2012 (50)    | 975             | Age related changes in nuclear vacuoles and DNA damage                                |
| Stone et al 2013 (51)    | 4822            | Total sperm count and normal morphology declined after 40 years, Sperm motility and semen volume decline after 43 and 45 years of age |
| Purandhar et al 2013 (52) | 90              | Fall in enzymatic antioxidants and neutrophil count with increasing age. The decline in motility, vitality, and morphology with aging |
| Omran et al 2013 (53)    | 52              | Fall in sperm density, motility, normal morphology, total antioxidant capacity and DNA integrity with aging |
| Priyadarssini et al 2014 (54) | 733          | Fall in progressive motility, vitality, and morphology with aging. No significant changes were found in semen volume and total count |

Limitation

The limitation of this study is that it is a retrospective analysis of data. Moreover, we took only age into consideration, but there can be many other factors like occupation, temperature, drugs, etc. that can affect the semen parameters and overall male fertility. So, in future keeping this as base information, we can conduct prospective analysis considering other factors also that can affect
male fertility. Hence, we can work in that direction so as to prevent such factors that can seriously affect the male fertility.

Conclusion

Hence, aging has a significant negative impact on various semen parameters and male fertility in this region of India. The older men in infertile couples have lower semen parameters resulting in lower fertility potential.

Acknowledgments

I thank Dr. Namit Kant Singh for his kind support and advice. No financial support was needed for conducting the study.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Zegers-Hochschild F, Adamson GD, de Mouzon J, Ishihara O, Mansour R, Nygren K, et al. The International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technology (ICMART) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Revised Glossary on ART Terminology. 2009. Hum Reprod 2009; 24: 2683-2687.

2. Afshoar A, Seyedhassani SM, Tabibnejad N. The epidemiological and etiological aspects of infertility in Yazd province of Iran. Iran J Reprod Med 2009; 7: 117-122.

3. WHO. WHO laboratory manual for the examination and processing of human semen. 5th Ed. Geneva, WHO; 2010.

4. Nallella KP, Sharma RK, Aziz N, Agarwal A. significance of sperm characteristics in the evaluation of male infertility. Fertil Steril 2006; 85: 629-634.

5. Agarwal A, Anandh Prabakaran S. Oxidative stress and antioxidants in male infertility: a difficult balance. Iran J Reprod Med 2005; 3: 1-8.

6. Agarwal A, Sekhon LH. The role of antioxidant therapy in the treatment of male infertility. Hum Fertil (Camb) 2010; 13: 217-225.

7. Amann RP. The cycle of the seminiferous epithelium in humans: a need to revisit? J Androl 2008; 29: 469-487.

8. Wang C, Leung A, Sinha-Hikim AP. Reproductive aging in the male brown-Norway rat: a model for the human. Endocrinology 1993; 133: 2773-2781.

9. Johnson L. Spermatogenesis and aging in the human. J Androl 1986; 7: 331-354.

10. Harman SM, Metter EJ, Tobin JD, Pearson J, Blackman MR. Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. Longitudinal effects of aging on serum total and free testosterone levels in healthy men. Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. J Clin Endocrinol Metab 2001; 86: 724-731.

11. Amaral S, Ramalho-Santos J. Aging, mitochondria and male reproductive function. Curr Aging Sci 2009; 2: 165-173.

12. Mahmoud AM, Goemaere S, El-Garem Y, Van Pottelbergh I, Comhaire FH, Kaufman JM. Testicular volume in relation to hormonal indices of gonadal function in community-dwelling elderly men. J Clin Endocrinol Metab 2003; 88: 179-184.

13. Sampson N, Untergasser G, Plas E, Berger P. The ageing male reproductive tract. J Pathol 2007; 211: 206-218.

14. Cooper TG, Noonan E, von Eckardstein S, Auger J, Baker HW, Behre HM, et al. World Health Organization reference values for human semen characteristics. Hum Reprod Update 2010; 16: 231-245.

15. Vigeh M, Smith DR, Hsu P-C. How does lead induce male infertility. Iran J Reprod Med 2011; 9: 8-14.

16. Brawer MK. Testosterone replacement in men with andropause: an overview. Rev Urol 2004; 6 (Suppl.): S9-S15.

17. Kovac JR, Addai J, Smith RP, Coward RM, Lamb DJ, Lipshultz LI. The effects of advanced paternal age on fertility. Asian J Androl 2013; 15: 723-728.

18. Eskenazi B, Wyrobek AJ, Slater E, Kidd SA, Moore L, Young S, Moore D. The association of age and semen quality in healthy men. Hum Reprod 2003; 18: 447-454.

19. WHO Laboratory Manual for the Examination of Human Semen and Sperm-cervical Mucus Interaction. 4th Ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; 1999: 128.

20. Joffe M, Li Z. Male and female factors in fertility. Am J Epidemiol 1994; 140: 921-929.

21. Girsh E, Katz N, Genkin L, Girtler O, Bockser J, Bezdin S, Barr I. Male age influences oocyte-donor program results. J Assist Reprod Genet 2008; 25: 137-143.

22. Sasano N, Ichijo S. Vascular patterns of the human testis with special reference to its senile changes. Tohoku J Exp Med 1969; 99: 269-280.

23. Kidd SA, Eskenazi B, Wyrobek AJ. Effects of male age on semen quality and fertility: a review of the literature. Fertil Steril 2001; 75: 237-248.

24. de la Rochebrochard E, Thonneau P. Paternal age and maternal age are risk factors for miscarriage; results of a multicentre European study. Hum Reprod 2002; 17: 1649-1656.

25. Jung A, Schuppe HC, Schill WB. Comparison of semen quality in older and younger men attending an andrology clinic. Andrologia 2002; 34: 116-122.

26. Klonoff-Cohen HS, Natrajan L. The effect of advancing paternal age on pregnancy and live birth rates in couples undergoing in vitro fertilization or gamete intrafallopian transfer. Am J Obstet Gynecol 2004; 191: 507-514.

27. Zhu QX, Meads C, Lu ML, Wu JQ, Zhou WJ, Gao ES. Turning point of age for semen quality: a population-based study in Chinese men. Fertil Steril 2011; 96: 572-576.

28. de Almeida Ferreira Braga DP, Setti AS, Figueira RC, Nichi M, Martinhago CD, Iaconelli A Jr, et al. Sperm organelle morphologic abnormalities: contributing factors and effects on intracytoplasmic...
sperm injection cycles outcomes. *Urology* 2011; 78: 786-791.

29. Slama R, Bouyer J, Windham G, Fenster L, Werwatz A, Swan SH. Influence of paternal age on the risk of spontaneous abortion. *Am J Epidemiol* 2005; 161: 816-823.

30. Kleinhaus K, Perrin M, Friedlander Y, Pattiel O, Malaspina D, Harlap S. Paternal age and spontaneous abortion. *Obstet Gynecol* 2006; 108: 369-377.

31. Glaser RL, Broman KW, Schulman RL, Eskenazi B, Wyrobek AJ, Jabs EW. The paternal-age effect in Apert syndrome is due, in part, to the increased frequency of mutations in sperm. *Am J Hum Genet* 2003; 73: 939-947.

32. Lambert SM, Masson P, Fisch H. The male biological clock. *World J Urol* 2006; 24: 611-617.

33. Wyrobek AJ, Eskenazi B, Young S, Arnheim N, Tiemann-Boege I, Jabs EW, Glaser RL, Pearson FS, Evenson D. Advancing age has differential effects on DNA damage, chromatin integrity, gene mutations, and aneuploidies in sperm. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2006; 103: 9601-9606.

34. Schmid TE, Eskenazi B, Baumgartner A, Marchetti F, Young S, Weldon R, et al. The effects of male age on sperm DNA damage in healthy non-smokers. *Hum Reprod* 2007; 22: 180-187.

35. Ford WC, North K, Taylor H, Farrow A, Hull MG, Golding J. Increasing paternal age is associated with delayed conception in a large population of fertile couples: evidence for declining fecundity in older men. The ALSPAC study team (Avon longitudinal study of pregnancy and childhood). *Hum Reprod* 2000; 15: 1703-1708.

36. Mukhopadhyay D, Varghese AC, Pal M, Banerjee SK, Bhattacharyya AK, Sharma RK, et al. Semen quality and age-specific changes: a study between two decades on 3,729 male partners of couples with normal sperm count and attending an andrology laboratory for infertility-related problems in an Indian city. *Fertil Steril* 2010; 93: 2247-2254.

37. Itoh N, Kayama F, Tatsuki TJ, Tsukamoto T. Have sperm counts deteriorated over the past 20 years in healthy, young Japanese men? Results from the Sapporo area. *J Androl* 2001; 22: 40-44.

38. Seo JT, Rha KH, Park YS, Lee MS. Semen quality over a 10-year period in 22,249 men in Korea. *Int J Androl* 2000; 23: 194-198.

39. Rolf C, Behre HM, Nieschlag E. Reproductive parameters of older compared to younger men of fertile couples. *Int J Androl* 1996; 19: 135-142.

40. Auger J, Kunsthorn JM, Czyglik F, Jouannet P. Decline in semen quality among fertile men in Paris during the past 20 years. *N Engl J Med* 1995; 332: 281-285.

41. Fisch H, Goluboff ET, Olson JH, Feldshuh J, Broder SJ, Barad DH. Semen analyses in 1,283 men from the United States over a 25-year period: no decline in quality. *Fertil Steril* 1996; 65: 1009-1014.

42. Andolz P, Bielsa MA, Vila J. Evolution of semen quality in North-eastern Spain: a study in 22,759 infertile men over a 36 year period. *Hum Reprod* 1999; 14: 731-735.

43. Sloter E, Schmid TE, Marchetti F, Eskenazi B, Nath J, Wyrobek AJ. Quantitative effects of male age on sperm motion. *Hum Reprod* 2006; 21: 2868-2875.

44. Gopalkrishnan K. Characteristics of semen parameters in a selected population of Indian men over a period of 10 years. *Curr Sci* 1998; 75: 939-940.

45. Harris ID, Fronczak C, Roth L, Meacham RB. Fertility and the Aging Male. *Rev Urol* 2011; 13: e184-e190.

46. Sartorius GA, Nieszlag E. Paternal age and reproduction. *Hum Reprod Update* 2010; 16: 65-79.

47. Hellstrom WJ, Overstreet JW, Sikka SC, Denne J, Ahuja S, Hoover AM, Sides GD, Cordell WH, Harrison LM, Whitaker JS. Semen and sperm reference ranges for men 45 years of age and older. *J Androl* 2006; 27: 421-428.

48. Levitas E, Lunenfeld E, Weisz N, Friger M, Potashnik G. Relationship between age and semen parameters in men with normal sperm concentration: analysis of 6022 semen samples. *Andrologia* 2007; 39: 45-50.

49. Cardona Maya W, Berdugo J, Cadavid Jaramillo A. The effects of male age on semen parameters: analysis of 1364 men attending an andrology center. *Aging Male* 2009; 12: 100-103.

50. Silva LF, Oliveira JB, Petersen CG, Mauri AL, Massaro FC, Cavagna M, et al. The effects of male age on sperm analysis by motile sperm organellar morphology examination (MSOME). *Reprod Biol Endocrinol* 2012; 10: 19.

51. Stone BA, Alex A, Werlin LB, Marris RP. Age thresholds for changes in semen parameters in men. *Fertil Steril* 2013; 100: 952-958.

52. Purandhkar K, Seshadri S. Age associated variations in human neutrophil and sperm functioning. *Asian Pac J Reprod* 2013; 2: 201-208.

53. Omran HM, Bakheet M, Dashti MG. Evaluation of age effects on semen parameters of infertile males. *Andrology* 2013; 2: 106.

54. Priyadarssini S, Panda B, Dash C, Routray P. Effect of age and abstinence on semen quality: A retrospective study in a teaching hospital. *Asian Pacific J Reproduction* 2014; 3: 134-141.

55. Sengupta P, Nwagha U. The aging sperm: Is the male reproductive capacity ticking to biological extinction? *J Basic Clin Reprod Sci* 2014; 3: 1-7.

56. Wiener-Megnazi Z, Auslander R, Dinolfi M. Advanced paternal age and reproductive outcome. *Asian J Androl* 2012; 14: 69-76.