

Young city women go for cord blood banking

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Suzanne Roshan, Farah Khan, Madhuri Dixit-Nene, Raveena Tandon and several other celebrity moms have opted to bank the umbilical cord blood stem cells of their children.

Its prohibitive cost — about Rs75,000 to one lakh for preserving the stem cells for a period of 21 years — is no longer a deterring factor for even non-celeb young, educated city moms, when it comes to cord blood banking, say gynaecologists in Mumbai on the eve of Mother's Day.

Gynaecologists are seeing a huge rise in the demand for the procedure, which is viewed as an insurance against about 80-odd disorders that might afflict the child in the future, including leukemia, thalassaemia, sickle cell disease, and even degenerative diseases like arthritis, spinal cord injury, atherosclerosis, inflammatory bowel disease, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis etc. Medical researchers are now exploring new uses for umbilical cord blood stem cells in treating diabetes, heart disease and stroke as well.

"There is definitely an increase in the trend. Currently, the prohibitive factor is the cost, but once it goes down the demand will rise further," said Dr Nandita Palshetkar, consultant gynaecologist at Lilavati Hospital. All pregnant patients at her clinic are informed about cord blood banking. "And 70 per cent of my patients go for it," she adds.

Coimbatore-based carpenter Senthil Kumar's eight-year-old thalassaemic daughter Thamirabharuni owes her life to this miracle of science. Thamira's parents opted to have another baby and saved his cord blood. Stem cells collected from the cord blood were then transplanted, which in turn, cured Thamira of her thalassaemia. "A baby's stem cells have a 25 per cent probability of being a perfect match for a sibling. But it may not work in every case," warned gynaecologist Dr Aarti Khandelwal.

Kandivili-resident Anju Hemrajani (name changed), whose daughter was diagnosed with thalassaemia major, also opted for another baby in the hopes that a stem cell transplant might be possible. "However, his tissues did not match hers. And so cord blood from my second delivery could not be used for my daughter's treat-

What is Cord Blood Banking?

Cord blood banking is a simple procedure in which the blood from the umbilical cord and placenta are retrieved soon after the birth of a baby and preserved for future use at a cord blood bank.

Expecting parents have to sign up with the stem cell bank a couple of weeks before delivery. The bank then sends the couple a collection kit box, which they need to carry to the hospital after informing the gynaecologist about their desire to preserve the cord blood.

The gynaecologist collects the residual blood from the umbilical cord in a blood bag. The blood bag, along with a gel pack, which has to be frozen before the collection, is put in the kit box and sent to the laboratory.

At the laboratory, scientists take out the blood, process it, separate the stem cells and store it in liquid nitrogen at a temperature of -196C.

ment," she said. "Nevertheless, I have opted to have my second baby's cord blood preserved. Even though it cost me a lakh of rupees, I think it is worth the money," said Hemrajani.

"Every other day I read about scientists coming up with some new stem cell cure. That is why I think it is a good idea to preserve my cord blood when I have my baby," said an eight months pregnant Sheetal Shetty, who has signed up for cord blood banking. Cord blood banking is definitely popular. LifeCell International, India's first umbilical cord blood stem cell bank, has preserved close to 25,000 samples from across the country, out of which 10,000 samples have come in the past one and half years. "We expect another 10,000 in the coming financial year," said Ravi Shankar, general manager, marketing, LifeCell. "The potential," he said, "is huge."

Companies even offer EMI plans, which along with rising awareness, have resulted in a rise in demand, says Shankar.