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TOI+ | Health

Why more Indian women are having their first babies after 40

Fertility specialists across India are witnessing a surge in pregnancies among women in their late 30s and 40s, driven by IVF, egg freezing, and shifting social norms – a trend echoing global patterns and reshaping the landscape of Indian motherhood

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When Priya, a 42-year-old finance professional in Mumbai, decided to marry at 40, motherhood wasn't at the top of her mind. "We thought we should at least check our fertility – just to be informed," she says. At Wockhardt Hospitals in Mumbai Central, she consulted Dr Gandhali Deorukhkar, who ran a thorough preconception assessment. The tests came back with reassuring results.

The couple was advised to try conceiving naturally for six months before considering assisted reproduction. "We decided to give it a shot," says Priya. "And to our surprise, I conceived naturally."

Priya's pregnancy, classified as advanced maternal age, progressed well initially. But at seven months, she developed gestational hypertension. A scan showed that her baby's growth had slowed.

"It was a scary moment," she remembers. Under close supervision and with medication, Priya carried the pregnancy to term. In January, she delivered a 2.6 kg baby girl via planned Caesarean section. "All my anxiety vanished when I held her," she says.

Priya is not alone. Across India, more women are becoming first-time mothers well into their 40s – a trend once thought biologically improbable and socially uncommon. The shift is transforming the very profile of Indian motherhood.

India's fertility landscape: Key NFHS insights

Total fertility rate

2015-16 (NFHS 4)  **2.2**

2019-21 (NFHS5)  **2.0**

Below replacement level fertility rate of **2.1**, indicating fewer births than required for generational replacement

Urban-rural split (2019-21)

Urban TFR  **1.6**

This suggests India's fertility decline is being led by urban centres, particularly Tier 1 and 2 cities

Rural TFR  **2.1**

Median age at first birth (women aged 25-49)

2015-16  **21.0 years**

2019-21  **21.2 years** Almost no change

However, age at first birth is higher in urban areas and among more educated women, particularly in states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu

Teenage childbearing (women aged 15-19)

2015-16  **8.0%**

2019-21  **6.8%** Modest decline in teenage pregnancies



Changing age of pregnancy

In the United States, a similar trend has just turned historical. A new report from the US National Centre for Health Statistics (NCHS) finds that, for the first time in 2023, more babies were born to women aged 40 and above than to teenagers. It marks the culmination of a demographic shift that began in the early 1990s, when seven out of 10 births were to women under 30. Today, just under half are.

Over the last three decades, births to US women aged 40 and older have surged by 193%, while teen births have dropped 73%. Fertility among women aged 35–39 is up 71%, and among women 40–44, up 127%.

India is charting a parallel course — albeit with different cultural contours and medical realities. According to India’s National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), the country’s total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped to 2.0, below the replacement level of 2.1. And while the national median age at first birth remains low at 21.2 years, urban and semi-urban India is seeing a quiet surge in late pregnancies.

“In my practice, nearly one in four fertility patients is now over 38,” says Dr Deorukhkar. “Ten years ago, it was one in ten.”



Rise of late motherhood in India

This shift is not confined to metros. In cities like Indore, Kochi, Jaipur and Pune, more women are delaying childbirth — often into their late 30s or early 40s — due to careers, financial goals, late marriages, or personal health journeys.

“I used to see 10 to 15 cases of advanced-age pregnancy each year,” says Dr Vandana Gawdi, Senior Consultant at Apollo Hospitals, Navi Mumbai. “Now I see around 40. What’s notable is that many are first-time mothers.”

The change, doctors agree, is deeply linked to education and empowerment. “Women today are focused on building careers and achieving stability before they start families,” says Dr Vaishali Joshi, consultant at Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital. “They are making informed, intentional choices.”

States with notably lower fertility



These low-TFR states also show higher maternal ages at first birth, increased educational attainment among women and higher urbanisation, often correlating with delayed childbearing

Science steps in

For many, Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) have made motherhood after 40 more than a hope — a medically supported reality. “I’ve seen women who froze their eggs in their early 30s and returned at 40 to use them,” says Dr Joshi. “Others turn to donor eggs or IVF after trying naturally.”

But older motherhood isn’t without challenges.

Dr Joshi recalls a 48-year-old patient with hypertension and a history of clotting. “At 16 weeks, she developed a retroplacental hematoma. We managed her with bed rest, progesterone, and blood thinners. At 34 weeks, she developed preeclampsia. The baby had stopped growing, and we had to do an emergency C-section. She needed ICU care afterward but recovered.”

These stories, doctors caution, highlight the medical tightrope of late pregnancies — higher risk of gestational diabetes, hypertension, chromosomal anomalies, and preterm labour.

The decision to conceive in one's 40s also involves a complex matrix of tests and care pathways. "We begin with a full health check," says Dr Sangeeta Raodeo of Fortis Hospital, Mulund, northeast of Mumbai. "Diabetes, hypertension, thyroid function, obesity — all are screened. If AMH (Anti-Müllerian Hormone) is above 1 ng/mL, we suggest trying naturally for up to six months. If below 1, we advise moving quickly to ART."

Her toolkit includes blood tests, infection screening, kidney function evaluation, glucose tolerance tests, and chromosomal screenings like the Non-Invasive Prenatal Test (NIPT), NT scans, anomaly scans, and fetal echocardiograms. "We monitor growth closely with third-trimester scans every 3-4 weeks," she adds.

Asmita Singh (name changed), a 44-year-old banker, thought motherhood was out of reach. "I got married at 43 — my second marriage — and assumed I was too old," she says. But after consulting Dr Anuranjita Pallavi of Medicover Hospitals, she opted for IVF using donor eggs.

Her AMH was just 0.7 ng/mL, indicating diminished ovarian reserve. "IVF with donor eggs offered the best chance," says Dr Pallavi. "She conceived in the first cycle. The pregnancy has been smooth."

"There's no drug that directly increases AMH," says Dr Firuza Parikh, Director at Sir HN Reliance Foundation Hospital. "But supplements like CoQ10, resveratrol, omega-3 fatty acids, and even PRP (Platelet Rich Plasma) therapy can improve egg quality."

Even so, conception after 40 is a race against time. Natural fertility drops below 5% per cycle, and miscarriage risks rise with age. ART success varies: IVF with own eggs has modest success; IVF with donor eggs and PGT-A (Preimplantation Genetic Testing for Aneuploidy) can push success rates to 65-70%, says Dr Gawdi.

A growing medical ecosystem

Late pregnancies are also transforming India's clinical landscape. "Back in 2000, when I began practising fetal medicine, there were barely a handful of us in India with formal training in the field," says Dr Vandana Bansal, Director of the Department of Fetal Medicine and Consultant, Obstetrics & Gynaecology at Surya Hospitals. "Today, that number has grown to over 5,000 specialists. This expansion is directly tied to the rise in late-age pregnancies – more women in their late 30s and 40s are opting for motherhood through IVF and other assisted reproductive techniques."

Every obstetrician now wants fetal medicine integrated into their practice. "It's essential," says Dr Bansal. "These pregnancies require a layered, collaborative approach."

All this has helped a new beginning for families today. India's fertility story is no longer one of just teenage births and early marriages. It's also now a story of second chances, scientific breakthroughs – and women rewriting the rules on when life begins.