

Ovarian stimulation protocols: impact on oocyte and endometrial quality and function

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Ovarian stimulation (OS) truly is an art. There exists a myriad of protocols used to achieve the same goal: stimulating the ovaries to produce more than one mature oocyte to improve the chance of a live birth. However, considerable debate remains as to whether OS impacts oocyte and endometrial quality to affect in vitro fertilization outcomes. Although “more is better” has long been considered the best approach for oocyte retrieval, this review challenges that notion by examining the influence of stimulation on oocyte quality. Likewise, improved outcomes after frozen blastocyst transfer suggest that OS perturbs endometrial preparation and/or receptivity, although correlating changes with implantation success remains a challenge. Therefore, the focus of this review is to summarize our current understanding of perturbations in human oocyte quality and endometrial function induced by exogenous hormone administration. We highlight the need for further research to identify more appropriate markers of oocyte developmental competence as well as those that define the roles of the endometrium in the success of assisted reproductive technology. (Fertil Steril® 2024; ■:■–■. ©2024 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

Key Words: Embryo, epigenetics, gene expression/transcriptome, gonadotropins, GnRH, immune regulation

In the 40+ years since its inception, ovarian stimulation (OS) has revolutionized in vitro fertilization (IVF). However, there remains little consensus on effective protocols, dosing, timing of administration, or choice of gonadotropin (1). Ovarian stimulation protocols however have one goal: to increase the number of oocytes, and therefore embryos, available for clinical use. What is often not considered is whether increasing the number of oocytes retrieved is at the expense of oocyte quality, and therefore outcomes. Concomitantly, the inherent supraphysiologic levels of both gonadotrophins and sex hormones after OS are often at odds with optimizing the endometrium for embryo implantation (2), contributing to concerns regarding possible adverse effects of OS on implantation and pregnancy establishment.

However, understanding the impact of stimulation on both oocyte quality and the endometrium is complicated by significant heterogeneity in the methods used, and the outcomes measured, such that comparison among studies is challenging at best. This review therefore seeks to outline our understanding of how OS impacts measures of oocyte and endometrial function and identify avenues of further research.

IMPACTS OF OS ON OOCYTE QUALITY

Oocyte development and maturation rely on highly orchestrated interactions between the oocyte, follicle, and hormonal control to coordinate cytoplasmic and meiotic maturation (3–6). Consequently, the environment in which the oocyte develops is critical to

the establishment of oocyte developmental competence (quality) (7).

Stimulation protocols significantly alter hormone levels relative to a natural cycle (8, 9), thereby bypassing natural selection mechanisms to recruit follicles at varying stages of development. However, resulting oocytes are not developmentally equivalent nor equally competent, impacting fertilization success and compromising embryo development (10). Oocyte quantity (a “more is better” approach), over quality, has therefore been the goal of stimulation protocols. Yet, the optimal number of oocytes per cycle continues to fuel debate.

A number of studies have identified a small range (6–15) within which the number of oocytes retrieved after OS is predictive of live birth (11–15). Indeed, in best-prognosis patients, Martin et al. (15) reported a significant reduction in live births when the number of oocytes retrieved exceeded 10, consistent with the estimated 10 follicles that are recruited per cycle in vivo (16), with a further reduction when >20 oocytes were retrieved (15).

Received July 27, 2024; revised August 19, 2024; accepted August 21, 2024.

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Fertil Steril® Vol. ■, No. ■, ■ 2024 0015-0282/\$36.00

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2024.08.340>

Recruitment of additional follicles beyond this range provides little, if not reduced, benefit (11, 14), suggesting that oocyte competence is limited to a modest number of oocytes within a given cycle, and polar body extrusion is an insufficient marker of oocyte competence. Yet, for the majority of clinics, the only criterion for retrieved oocytes is the extrusion of a polar body (metaphase II [MII]) as an indicator of maturation and therefore surrogate for developmental competence (17).

OS may alter oocyte morphology

The predictive value of oocyte morphology remains debatable (17) as characteristics are largely subjective, and abnormalities can be difficult to discern in routine clinical settings (18). Consequently, beyond a uniform cytoplasm, morphological assessment is rarely conducted in the majority of clinics. Despite this, a limited number of human studies suggest that stimulation may impact oocyte morphology, whereas animal studies do suggest a strong association (19–22).

Gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) antagonist use increases the incidence of oocyte dysmorphisms, including vacuoles and granularity, and smooth endoplasmic reticulum (SER) aggregates, relative to an agonist protocol in some studies (23, 24), but not others (25). However, studies examining cytoplasmic features of oocyte quality are frequently underpowered. Indeed, Otsuki et al. (26) reported no influence of stimulation on SER aggregation, yet clusters were three times more common following a short protocol, with small sample size obscuring any significant findings. Likewise, duration of stimulation tended toward being predictive of SER aggregates but was only assessed in a subset of patients in which SER aggregates were repetitively seen across cycles (27).

Conflicting results have also been reported when comparing oocytes from follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and human menopausal gonadotropin (hMG)-stimulated cycles. Imthurn et al. (28) reported a lower incidence of dark cytoplasm in FSH-stimulated cycles; however, neither Ng et al. (29) nor Rashidi et al. (30) observed differences in polar body, zona, or cytoplasmic abnormalities between FSH and hMG. However, these latter studies were only powered to detect a difference in MII rates. In contrast, Hassan-Ali et al. (31) reported that hMG dose was positively correlated with the presence of coarse granules in the perivitelline space (PVS). Similarly, lower doses of FSH were correlated with reduced PVS granularity, with more abnormalities observed with an increasing number of aspirated follicles (32). Retrospective analysis has likewise identified a correlation between PVS granularity and the duration of GnRH antagonist administration, accompanied by lower embryo quality and embryo arrest, although absolute incidence was not significantly different (33). No impact of granularity on embryonic or clinical outcomes was observed by Hassan-Ali et al. (31), however.

Despite a lack of consensus on oocyte characteristics that are predictive of outcome, these findings nonetheless indicate that the acquisition of an MII state does not confer developmental competence. Although such differences may in part reflect the recruitment of poorer quality oocytes within the

responding follicle cohort, these data suggest that there may be a relationship between OS and morphological abnormalities. Integrated analysis of multiple measures will be required to further explore morphological characteristics indicative of quality and outcomes, along with comparison with oocytes from natural cycles. Recent advances in artificial intelligence, incorporating deep learning (34, 35), may provide avenues to quantify oocyte quality similar to the augmentation of existing embryo grading systems (36, 37), along with other non-invasive measures of oocyte physiology. As such, novel measures of oocyte quality could serve not only to improve outcomes for IVF patients but also to manage expectations for elective egg freezing and donor cycles.

Contribution of OS to aneuploidy

A higher incidence of chromosomal abnormalities as a result of OS was first reported in human embryos by Van Blerkom and Henry (38) and later by Munne et al. (39). FSH was subsequently shown to modulate chromatin remodeling within the oocyte, independent of follicle stage (40), suggesting that exogenous hormones initiate changes within the oocyte that alter meiotic progression and the coordination of chromosome segregation. Indeed, Rubio et al. (41) observed a correlation between aneuploidy rates and FSH dose. Despite this, several reports suggest that rates of aneuploidy are not influenced by different OS protocols (42–44) and are equivalent to natural cycles (45). In contrast, McCulloh et al. (46) reported a positive correlation between the fraction of stimulation comprising hMG and euploidy in donor preimplantation genetic testing for aneuploidy cycles, suggesting that the luteinizing hormone (LH)-activity within hMG may better support oocyte maturation and maintenance of a euploid state. Furthermore, a higher MII retrieval rate in patients receiving a standard GnRH agonist protocol was accompanied by higher aneuploidy rates, in contrast to a (mild) GnRH antagonist protocol, plausibly indicating improved oocyte quality with a mild stimulation approach (47). Wang et al. (48) reported a lower euploidy rate in embryos from a GnRH antagonist protocol compared with those from a long GnRH agonist protocol, although significant differences in patient characteristics were evident. One mechanism that may contribute to an increased incidence of aneuploidy in OS cycles is through perturbation of spindle structure, with spindle length reported to be increased after OS relative to natural cycles (49). However, all these studies are complicated by the inability to distinguish between direct OS effects and underlying infertility.

Data nevertheless suggest that genomic stability within the maturing oocyte is likely sensitive to not only exogenous hormone administration but also dose. As maternal meiotic errors are the main cause of embryonic aneuploidy (50), OS may compound the effects of maternal age on chromosomal integrity. Furthermore, telomere shortening has been proposed to contribute to chromosomal instability in oocytes (51–53), as polar body telomere length has been correlated with embryo aneuploidy (54). Given that OS has been associated with a reduction in total antioxidant capacity (55), and oxidative stress can accelerate telomere shortening

(56), OS could plausibly alter the regulation of telomere maintenance. However, this requires examination as no studies have explored whether OS alters telomere length or telomerase activity in human oocytes.

Metabolic changes that impact oocyte competence

Metabolism and nutrient availability are integral to the regulation of oocyte quality (57–59). Despite no significant difference in clinical pregnancy rates due to low sample size (60), different OS regimens have been shown to alter follicular fluid lipid profiles (55, 60, 61). Few studies have directly assessed the impact of OS on human oocyte or cumulus cell metabolism, and none have correlated metabolic profiles with outcomes as a function of OS regimen, nor relative to a natural cycle.

A small study of 349 denuded human MII oocytes reported an FSH-induced increase in oxygen consumption relative to hMG alone or in combination with FSH (62). Oxygen consumption was correlated with fertilization rates (62), confirming previous findings that oocytes that fail to fertilize display lower respiration rates (63). Similarly, comparison of amino acid use in clinically unsuitable human MII oocytes (germinal vesicle and metaphase I (MI) oocytes on retrieval after OS) revealed differences between FSH- and hMG-stimulated oocytes, despite equivalent numbers of oocytes progressing to MII from both protocols (64). The depletion of asparagine and glutamine, amino acids predictive of developmental competence in the embryo (65), was negatively correlated with FSH dose, suggesting that higher doses negatively impact oocyte quality through alterations in metabolism. Consistent with these findings, Tetkova et al. (66) reported that FSH administration perturbed mouse oocyte amino acid use in a dose-dependent manner. Plausibly, altered amino acid use impacts homeostasis regulation and protein synthesis at a critical time when storage is required to support developmental competence and early embryo development (67). Indeed, differences in the oocyte proteome between natural and OS cycles have been reported (68).

Further changes in cumulus cell metabolism in response to OS have been reported through the analysis of gene expression; however, additional studies are required to define the extent of metabolic perturbation induced by OS. Metabolic imaging of oocytes and cumulus cells using fluorescence lifetime imaging microscopy (69–71), hyperspectral (72), or optical coherence microscopy (73) has the potential to revolutionize the way in which oocytes are graded before insemination and enhance our understanding of the effects of OS on oocyte physiology.

OS induces alterations in the cumulus and granulosa cell transcriptome

Perturbations in oocyte transcription likewise have the potential to impair oocyte quality (74). Although a number of animal studies have revealed altered oocyte gene expression after OS (reviewed by Dvoran et al. (75)), assessment has been limited to the analysis of follicular cells in humans

(reviewed by Ducreux et al. (76)). There is however a lack of consensus on the utility of cumulus cell gene expression as a predictor of outcomes, likely a result of variable patient characteristics and treatment protocols between studies.

Cumulus cell markers associated with oocyte developmental competence (77) and cumulus cell differentiation (78) have been reported to be differentially regulated by hMG and recombinant FSH (rFSH). This is consistent with reported alterations in genes associated with cell differentiation, cell cycle and chromosome segregation, and immune response in cumulus cells after stimulation, compared with triggered (49) and untriggered natural cycles (79), and in granulosa cells (80). Furthermore, the inclusion of LH during induction induces additional changes in cumulus cell gene expression distinct from hMG- and FSH-only stimulation (81), with alterations in genes involved in cell-to-cell signaling, cellular growth and proliferation, immune regulation, metabolism, DNA methylation, and DNA damage and repair. This may be of clinical significance because cumulus cell transcriptional differences have indicated that FSH may be more appropriate for normal responders, whereas hMG may be better suited to poor responders (78). Comparison of single vs. dual trigger has also identified alterations in the expression of cumulus cell-cell cycle regulation and immune regulation (82) along with oocyte growth and maturation in cumulus and granulosa cells (82, 83), likewise with differences between responder types (81). Changes in immune regulation are consistent with OS potentiation of inflammation (84), a proinflammatory cytokine signature in follicular fluid after stimulation (85) and a more pro-oxidant environment (55). Combined, these data indicate that different OS regimens alter pathways that regulate follicular cell functions that support oocyte developmental competence.

Alterations in metabolic gene expression have also been described in response to different OS protocols. El-Maarri et al. (86) identified that cumulus cell differentially expressed genes were enriched for metabolic pathways in response to long and short protocols along with inhibition of cellular growth in the long protocol. Similarly, differences in mitochondrial (87) and lipid metabolism (88) gene expression have been reported between hMG- and rFSH-stimulated patients in granulosa cells. Alterations in genes regulating lipid metabolism have also been described in cumulus cells between urinary FSH, rFSH, and hMG stimulation (89) and in miRNAs regulating these pathways between rFSH and rFSH + LH stimulation, with age-associated differences also identified (90). Lipids play critical roles during oocyte maturation to support signaling events important for cytoplasmic maturation, with perturbations in lipid profiles identified with aging, obesity, and polycystic ovary syndrome (reviewed by Khan et al. (91)).

Combined, these data reveal that pathways that underpin oocyte maturation are susceptible to alteration by exogenous hormones. Significantly, cumulus cell transcripts have been found to be transported to the oocyte (92), suggesting transcriptomic alterations have the ability to directly modulate the coordinated regulation of oocyte maturation. Although no differences in embryological outcomes were reported in the majority of studies, few studies have correlated cumulus

cell transcriptional changes after different OS protocols with post-transfer outcomes. Although these data reveal the significant variability in response to different stimulation regimens, and therefore the difficulty in comparing outcomes between studies, they also highlight the sensitivity of metabolic pathways to OS. There is however a need for further studies examining cumulus cell changes in natural and OS cycles, as well as comparison with a fertile cohort. Analysis of the oocyte will also be essential to fully understand the impact of the molecular consequences of OS on developmental competence, along with whether such changes correlate with cumulus cell gene expression.

Epigenetic effects of OS: a cause for concern?

Oocyte development is also characterized by significant remodeling of the epigenetic landscape, which can be impaired by gamete, and embryo, manipulation (reviewed by Marshall and Rivera (93)). Our understanding of the effects of OS on the epigenome is largely limited to indirect measures of oocyte quality in humans, but there is evidence to suggest that OS disrupts imprint establishment within the human oocyte.

Maternally imprinted genes may be particularly sensitive because imprints are progressively acquired through oocyte development and maturation (94). Inappropriate loss or gain of methylation in maternally imprinted genes, including KvDMR1, PEG1 and H19, has been observed in human oocytes after superovulation (95, 96). However, whether these changes were a direct result of stimulation, age, or underlying infertility could not be distinguished, although parallel analyses in mouse oocytes do indicate that exogenous hormone administration contributes to altered DNA methylation (96). Numerous studies in animal models have confirmed the negative impacts of OS on oocyte (reviewed by Lopes et al. (97)) and embryo DNA methylation (reviewed by Fauque (98)), which impact ploidy, subsequent development, implantation, and viability (93, 99) independent of underlying infertility. However, it remains unclear whether stimulation contributes to more extensive epigenetic aberrations that impact on oocyte quality and subsequent embryo development in humans.

Significantly, epigenetic changes represent heritable changes to chromatin accessibility that may not have obvious repercussions in early development (that is, blastocyst development may be achieved and result in a live birth) but rather manifest as an increased risk for disease in later life. Although beyond the scope of this review, it is important to note that limited follow-up data in humans suggest that exogenous hormone administration may be associated with reduced live birth rate with increasing FSH dose (100, 101), an increased risk of small-for-gestational age (102), poorer perinatal health (103), short stature and metabolic alterations (104), and higher systolic blood pressure (105). Likewise, natural embryo transfer cycles, compared with programmed cycles, have recently been noted to have lower rates of gestational hypertensive diseases and hemorrhage compared with traditional OS cycles (106). Importantly, it is increasingly recognized that metabolism is a critical and dynamic

regulator of epigenetic programming during early development (reviewed by Harvey (107)). Consequently, perturbations in follicular fluid metabolite availability, combined with alterations in metabolic pathway activity in oocytes and/or cumulus cells, may be one mechanism through which OS alters deposition and removal of epigenetic marks with long-lasting effects beyond early development. However, a significant limitation of the majority of studies is that OS not only has the capacity to affect the oocyte, but also the local microenvironment and endometrium within the same cycle, with a plausibly cumulative impact on development and long-term health.

IMPACTS OF OS ON ENDOMETRIAL FUNCTION

Beyond the criteria to select developmentally competent oocytes, a further challenge has been the identification of reliable markers of endometrial receptivity, their role in mediating implantation, and therefore the potential impacts of their (mis)regulation by exogenous hormone administration. In vivo, achieving a successful pregnancy depends on the synchronization of endometrial and embryonic development and coordinated embryo-endometrial cross-talk (108). Therefore, understanding how individual OS protocols impact the endometrium has continued to be of interest as we search for ways to increase the success of IVF for our patients. The timing of these events, including identifying the implantation window through the evaluation of endometrial histology, thickness, receptivity, and ultimately, live birth rates, has proved challenging because of significant heterogeneity and efficacy in the methods used (109). This has been further complicated by small sample sizes, differing days of uterine biopsy and embryo transfer, and patient characteristics. Consequently, there remains no consensus on a definitive marker of receptivity. Nevertheless, alteration of the endometrial environment by OS has been well documented in animal studies (110–112) and the benefits of a freeze-all strategy are increasingly employed to minimize the detrimental effects of OS on the endometrium (113–117).

Histological effects of OS on endometrial remodeling and synchrony

Endometrial remodeling, orchestrated by estrogen and progesterone (118, 119), is critical for implantation and necessitates synchronized changes to establish a “window of implantation.” A number of studies have indicated that the type of OS used can cause varying degrees of endometrial asynchrony (120, 121). Sterzik et al. (122) evaluated endometrial biopsies taken 2 days after ovulation from 58 patients undergoing IVF, and found that only 30% of patients demonstrated “in-phase” luteal phase histology, although the clinical significance of this finding was unclear. Analysis of endometrial biopsies in both spontaneous and subsequent OS oocyte donor cycles found asynchronous glandular and stromal development was more likely to occur after OS. However, asynchrony was also present in 30% of spontaneous cycles (123). After the advent of GnRH agonists to inhibit pituitary LH release, Damario et al. (124) evaluated the histology of the endometrium via endometrial biopsy 5 days after

progesterone initiation and found that the endometrium in exogenous cycles was asynchronous 33.7% of the time. However, clinical pregnancy outcomes in a prior cycle were similar between the synchronous and asynchronous groups. They concluded that asynchrony could be a normal variant and may not have significant clinical implications. A limitation of studies examining measures of endometrial receptivity is that such analyses cannot be performed in the same cycle as embryo transfer. As such, this surrogate marker does not provide direct clinical outcome data.

Inconsistencies between studies have also led some to question the accuracy of endometrial morphology (125, 126); however, disparity in OS protocols, patient characteristics, and biopsy timing likely underpin such differences (120). Indeed, progestin priming, used as an inhibitor of the premature LH surge instead of a GnRH agonist or antagonists (127), is not a suitable approach for fresh transfer because early exposure to progesterone causes premature advancement of the endometrium (128). Likewise, asynchrony in glandular-stromal dating after OS was more evident periovulation than during the mid-secretory phase, relative to no asynchrony in natural cycles of women with proven fertility (129). Abnormal histology indicative of premature advancement at LH+2 was also reported in fertile women after GnRH agonist stimulation irrespective of fertility status (118). However, in the same study, the degree of disturbance was negatively correlated with subsequent pregnancy (118). Importantly, Evans et al. (118) also reported alterations in leukocyte and neutrophil number and activation. Consistent with this, Chemerinski et al. (129) identified differential susceptibility of immune cells within the endometrium to alteration by OS relative to natural cycles across multiple timepoints, with the potential to impact implantation. Such changes likely arise due to the supraphysiological rise in hormone levels, particularly estrogen (130), and/or GnRH analogues (118). Further studies are however required to determine whether other protocols affect endometrial advancement.

Endometrial thickness

Endometrial thickness has been positively correlated with clinical pregnancy rates (131–134). Conversely, the utility of endometrial thickness in predicting live birth has been questioned (135–138). Several studies have nonetheless identified differences in endometrial thickness after OS. One study evaluating perinatal outcomes for 402 deliveries after OS with FSH and GnRH antagonist with a human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) trigger showed that higher levels of estrogen on the day of trigger as well as thin endometrial lining were both associated with adverse perinatal outcomes (139). This suggests a potential deleterious impact of supraphysiologic levels of gonadotrophins and consequently sex hormones, as well as thin endometrial lining, leading to abnormal placentation and early embryonic development. This approach is, therefore, often limited to situations in which a “freeze-all” is planned.

Clomiphene citrate, a selective estrogen receptor modulator, has been used for ovulation induction in IVF cycles

either alone or in conjunction with low-dose gonadotropins as part of minimal stimulation protocols or as part of high dose protocols for OS designed for poor responders (140, 141). As a selective estrogen receptor modulator, this agent has an antagonistic impact on the endometrium and therefore can cause the undesired impact of endometrial thinning (142–144). However, although a meta-analysis confirmed a thinner endometrial thickness during intrauterine insemination cycles with CC, there was no difference seen in pregnancy outcomes (137). A confounding variable with these protocols is that they are typically employed with a GnRH antagonist that may also have a deleterious effect on the endometrium. Although a recent retrospective study indicated that live birth rates after CC administration were significantly lower in fresh cycles relative to vitrified-warmed and natural cycles (145), large-scale studies incorporating examination of additional markers of endometrial receptivity, thickness, and function are warranted.

A freeze-all strategy to improve implantation?

The introduction of GnRH antagonist protocols has the positive outcomes of reducing the duration of OS, rates of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS), and gonadotropin dose requirements. Although this approach has been associated with lower implantation and live birth rate compared with GnRH agonist cycles after single embryo transfer of a fresh embryo (146), which may depend on the patient population (147), other systematic reviews have not identified differences in clinical outcomes between agonist and antagonist protocols (148, 149). Nonetheless, there is some evidence of improved outcomes after frozen embryo transfer. For example, Roque et al. (150) evaluated IVF outcomes of 530 patients undergoing a GnRH antagonist protocol and day 3 embryo transfer. Clinical outcomes were significantly better in the frozen embryo transfer group compared with the fresh, which suggested impaired endometrial receptivity caused by the stimulation protocol. Subsequent retrospective and prospective studies using day 3 or day 5 transfer in either GnRH agonist or antagonist cycles have further demonstrated the benefit of frozen embryo transfers (113–116, 151, 152), although others have found no or reduced benefit (153–157). A recent Cochrane review found limited evidence for the use of frozen embryo transfers (158). However, these studies are complicated by different dosing, as well as patient characteristics, embryo freezing protocols, and number of embryos transferred. Indeed, multivariate analysis identified a significant impact of total gonadotropin dose on live birth rate in fresh cycles (159), suggesting an effect on the endometrium and/or oocyte, whereas a recent study identified a reduction in live birth rates with FSH doses above 1,410 IU (160). Of note, a meta-analysis evaluating the utility of a freeze-all strategy concluded that it may be beneficial when >15 oocytes are retrieved because of possible impairment in endometrial receptivity (161). However, in cycles producing lower numbers of oocytes, a freeze-all strategy does not appear to be superior (161). It is important to state that

the majority of studies have not evaluated specific parameters of endometrial receptivity, which makes these conclusions hypothetical at best.

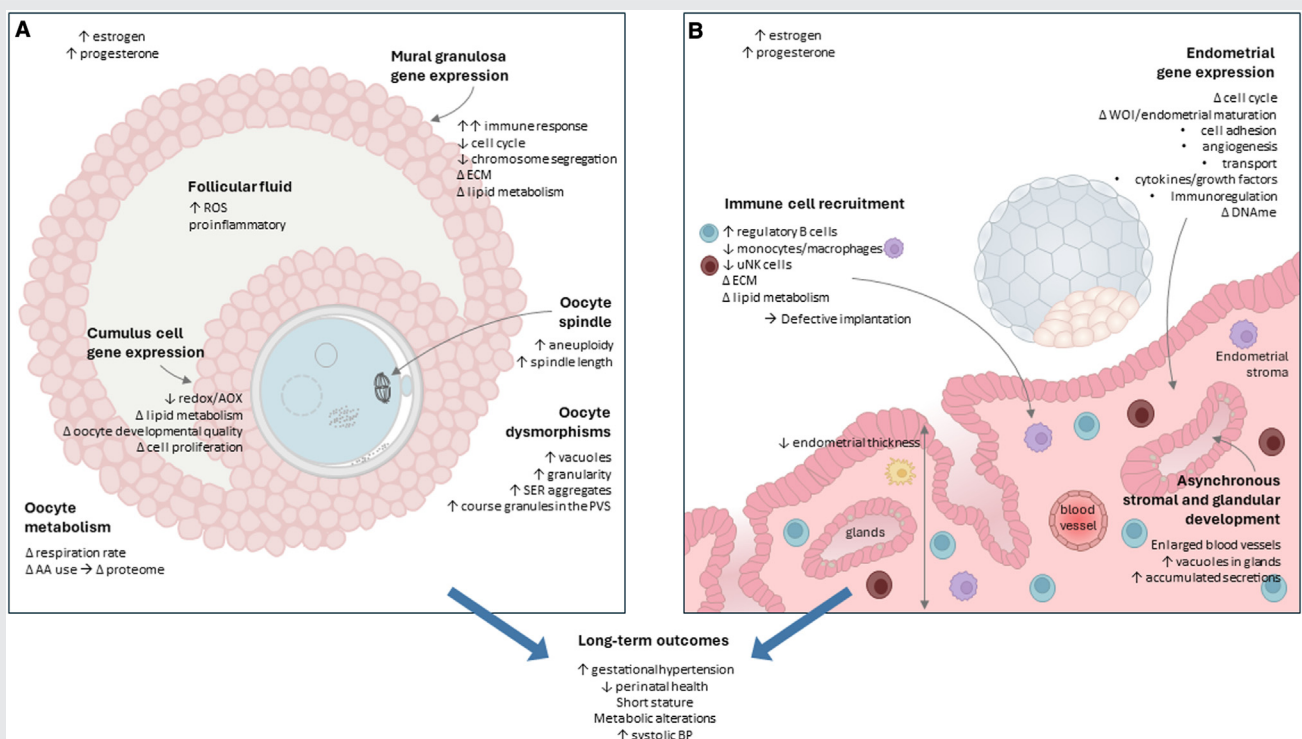
The type of trigger used to induce final oocyte maturation is also an important decision. hCG, which acts as a surrogate for LH, has traditionally been used particularly for fresh embryo transfer cycles. Introduction of a GnRH agonist as an alternative trigger of endogenous LH release from the pituitary has been shown to decrease the risk of OHSS (162). However, several studies have also noted lower implantation and clinical pregnancy rates along with a higher incidence of early pregnancy loss with GnRH agonist trigger use and fresh embryo transfers (163, 164). There have been two main approaches addressing the concern for the lack of luteal support and endometrial development with a fresh transfer after GnRH agonist trigger: increased estradiol/progesterone supplementation and low-dose hCG dual trigger. Both approaches have been shown to lead to pregnancy rates similar to standard hCG trigger alone, with a low incidence

of OHSS (165, 166). Likewise, letrozole has been shown to be effective when used in a modified natural cycle for endometrial preparation before frozen embryo transfer (167). However, debate remains as to the effectiveness of endometrial preparations in improving clinical outcomes (168).

Receptivity: OS alters immune response gene expression in the endometrium

The supraphysiological concentrations of estrogen and progesterone resulting from OS alter the endometrial expression of their receptors, consistent with an alteration in receptivity (120, 169). Although some studies have reported limited gene expression differences with natural cycles (170, 171), they nonetheless identify OS-induced changes in genes involved in the window of implantation (171) and immune regulation (170). More recently, alterations in genes involved in immune response have been confirmed by RNA sequencing in IVF patient biopsies after OS (172).

FIGURE 1



Characteristics of oocytes, cumulus cells, and the endometrium found to be altered by conventional ovarian stimulation. (A) Perturbations elicited by exogenous hormone administration likely to impact oocyte quality include proinflammatory alterations to the follicular fluid microenvironment, an increased incidence of oocyte morphological dysmorphisms and genetic instability, as well as alterations in oocyte metabolism that may contribute to an altered oocyte proteome and altered cumulus and granulosa cell transcription. (B) Stimulation elicits changes to the endometrium that impact endometrial receptivity, including asynchronous stromal and glandular development, reduced endometrial thickness, and modulation of endometrial gene expression indicative of changes in the window of implantation (WOI) including immunoregulation; changes that are also reflected by perturbed recruitment, activation, and localization of immune cells. The use of exogenous hormones may also be associated with long-term outcomes including increased gestational hypertension, reduced perinatal health, and metabolic alterations. Arrows indicate direction of change (increased/decreased); Δ represents documented alterations in the noted characteristic. AA = amino acid; AOX = antioxidant; BP = blood pressure; DNAm = DNA methylation; ECM = extracellular matrix; PVS = perivitelline space; ROS = reactive oxygen species; SER = smooth endoplasmic reticulum; uNK = uterine natural killer; WOI = window of implantation.

Harvey. Stimulation effects on oocytes and the endometrium. *Fertil Steril* 2024.

Studies examining responses independent of infertility diagnosis likewise demonstrate consistent alterations in pathways that underpin receptivity and alterations in the timing of molecular changes out of step with natural cycles (173). The use of a GnRH antagonist stimulation protocol in normal fertile women resulted in alterations in pathways essential for endometrial maturation and implantation, including regulation of cell adhesion, anion transport, angiogenesis, and immunomodulation relative to natural cycles (174). Similar alterations in genes involved in the window of implantation, including cytokines/growth factors and genes involved in immune response, were reported in endometrial biopsies of fertile donors after GnRH agonist stimulation relative to a prior natural cycle in the same patients (175) as well as those involved in natural killer cell signaling and extracellular matrix degradation in donor GnRH agonist and antagonist cycles relative to natural cycles (176). Senapati et al. (176) also reported OS-induced alterations in DNA methylation in endometrial biopsies, although the significance of such changes remains unclear. Differences in these pathways between OS protocols have also been described (170, 177, 178) suggesting these pathways are particularly sensitive to modulation by OS.

Although these studies reflect differing OS protocols, day of biopsy, and patient profiles, consistent involvement of pathways including immune regulation may represent a mechanism by which endometrial receptivity is altered by OS. Indeed, such changes are consistent with alterations in immune cell abundance within the endometrium (118, 129, 179), as well as alterations in gene expression associated with functional changes in the ability of cells to promote extravillous trophoblast invasion in uterine natural killer cells after OS (179). The changes induced by OS likely contribute to the moderate to severe alteration in receptivity observed in normal responders (180) and may have an impact on implantation. However, further studies are required to determine the significance of these endometrial gene changes.

OS and the embryo

Although beyond the scope of this review, it is important to acknowledge that the blastocyst plays an active role in implantation. Numerous studies have reported negative effects of OS on embryo development, particularly in animal models, including a reduction in blastocyst development (181) and cell number (182), and developmental delay (183), impacting implantation on transfer to unstimulated uteri (112, 183). Similar differences have been observed in human embryos (47, 184–186), including when compared with natural cycles (187, 188). Although changes in embryo development may in part reflect alterations induced within the follicle, impacting oocyte quality, in vivo OS alterations likely disrupt the dynamic signaling between the blastocyst and endometrium that underpins implantation, and placental and fetal development (189, 190). In support of this, reduced embryo quality has been shown to alter endometrial responses (191) and changes in both gonadotropin and sex hormones alter the endometrial secretome (192–194).

CONCLUSION

Despite advancements in laboratory techniques leading to increased success in creating and cryopreserving high-quality blastocysts, we still have much to discover about oocyte quality, the endometrium, and their roles in the success of assisted reproductive technology. Although studies have attempted to examine the effect of OS on oocyte quality and the endometrium, interpretation of these data are limited by not only the potential contribution of infertility to variable responses, but also heterogeneity in protocols and doses used, how the impact of OS is measured, including limited comparison with unstimulated data, and limitations in sample size and study design. Consequently, significant gaps in our understanding of the impact of OS on oocyte quality and endometrial function remain. However, collectively, a growing body of evidence suggests that exogenous gonadotropin administration may negatively impact oocyte quality, altering oocyte morphological characteristics, genetic stability, metabolism, transcription, and epigenetic regulation. Combined with alterations in endometrial receptivity, such changes may act cumulatively to negatively impact implantation and highlight the need to optimize OS (Fig. 1). As such, the increase in oocyte number afforded by OS may come at a cost of negative impacts on oocyte and endometrial quality and long-term outcomes. Personalization of OS using current approaches however poses a challenge given differences in patient age, etiology, and genetics. Stimulation regimens guided by pharmacogenomics may underpin personalized treatment options. Although a GnRH antagonist protocol with GnRH agonist trigger is often considered a better option because of the reduced risk for OHSS, detrimental effects of GnRH analogues on oocyte and endometrial quality have been described. The shift toward an increasing reliance on vitrification of all embryos with delayed embryo transfer may improve endometrial development, with less concern for the impact of OS protocols on the endometrium. There may be benefits to adopting more physiological protocols; however, this is accompanied by a perceived reduction in success based on lower MII retrieval rates. Evolving technologies to non-invasively assess oocyte quality, and to define the role of the endometrium on implantation, will shed more light on the impacts of OS.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Alexandra J. Harvey: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. Bryn E. Willson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. Eric S. Surrey: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. David K. Gardner: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Interests

A.J.H. has nothing to disclose. B.E.W. has nothing to disclose. E.S.S. has nothing to disclose. D.K.G. has nothing to disclose.

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