

Vasectomy

What is vasectomy?

Vasectomy, which is the most common method of sterilisation in men, is an operation in which the two 'vas' tubes (the *vas deferens*) are cut and tied. This blocks the flow of sperm from the testicles into the penis, so that when the man ejaculates the semen does not contain sperm.

How is the operation done?

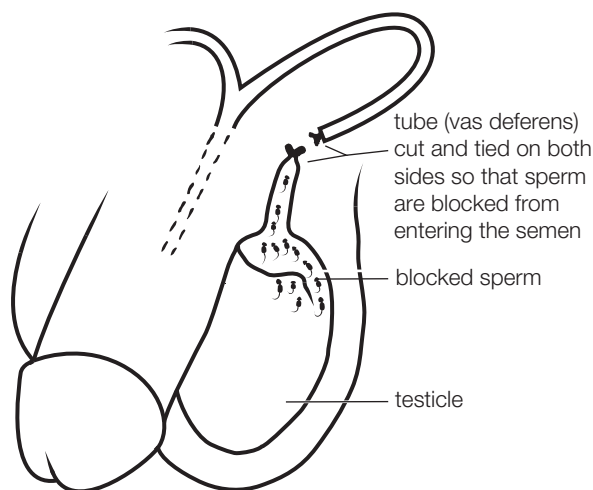
This simple operation, which can be performed under a local or a general anaesthetic, usually takes about 30 minutes. It is done through two small cuts in each side of the scrotum (bag) or through one cut in the middle. The 'vas' tube, which lies just below the skin, is picked up and cut. About 1 cm of it is removed; the ends are tied off and then cauterised with a hot needle.

How effective is a vasectomy?

Vasectomy is reliable because every precaution is taken to separate the tubes so that they do not rejoin. Despite this, about 1 in 500 vasectomies fail because the tubes somehow manage to rejoin.

Is the man sterile immediately?

No. It takes about 20 ejaculations to clear all the sperm from the tubes above the cut. About 2 to 3 months after the operation it is necessary to have 1 or 2 (preferably 2) sperm counts to make sure that the semen has no sperm. The semen has to be collected by masturbation and examined under a microscope.



Does vasectomy affect sexual function?

No. It makes no difference to a man's sex drive and performance. Some say that their sex life is improved because the worry about contraception is removed. Despite the absence of sperm in the semen, the fluid ejaculated seems normal because most of it is produced high in the tubes at the base of the penis.

Normal sexual activity can be started 7 to 8 days after vasectomy, but it is important to continue some form of birth control until the sperm count is zero.

What happens to the sperm?

Sperm are still produced in the testicles but lie around in the blocked tube for about 3 weeks before shrivelling up and being absorbed into the body in a similar way to blood after a bruise. Sperm only make up about 1% of the fluid ejaculated.

What are the side effects of vasectomy?

Bruising and swelling are common problems but settle after about 2 days. Bleeding and infection occur sometimes, but they settle quickly with treatment. A small lump caused by a build-up of sperm can develop at the operation site: these sperm *granulomas* usually settle themselves.

Can vasectomy be reversed?

The cut tubes can be rejoined by microsurgery, but there is no guarantee of regaining fertility. As a general rule about 40% of vasectomy reversals lead to successful pregnancy.

Vasectomy should be regarded as permanent and irreversible.

It is important to be definite about the decision to have the operation and not to have it under pressure.