

The mating game is far more complicated than X and Y

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The race for life.

(PhysOrg.com) -- University of Adelaide research reveals that a man's sperm does far more than fertilise an egg in the womb.

According to Professor Sarah Robertson from the University's Robinson Institute, semen has special qualities that contribute to a healthy pregnancy, including helping to prepare the female body for nurturing the [fetus](#).

But the news isn't all good for men. It appears some [sperm](#) fails to 'communicate' with the [female reproductive tract](#) and while a man can appear to be fertile, his semen can be rejected by a woman if it's not compatible with her.

This is more likely to happen if a woman has not previously been exposed to his sperm over a period of time.

"We used to think that if a couple couldn't get pregnant, and the man's semen test was normal, the problem lay with the woman. But it appears this is not always the case," says Professor Robertson.

The fertility specialist is leading a national research project examining the actions of semen in the cervix and [uterus](#) after [intercourse](#) takes place.

"We have discovered that sperm doesn't just fertilise an egg. It actually contains signalling molecules that are responsible for activating immune changes in women so they can accept a foreign substance in the body - in this case sperm - leading to conception and a healthy pregnancy.

"It's rather like a two-way dance. The male provides information that increases the chances of conception and progression to pregnancy, but the female body has a quality control system which needs convincing that his sperm is compatible, and also judges whether the conditions are right for reproducing. That's where the dance can go wrong with some couples - if the male signals are not strong enough, or if the female system is too `choosy'.

"If we can understand the cascade of events which come into play when the sperm enters the female reproductive tract, we may be able to mimic or assist this with new therapies, encouraging tolerance of her partner's semen, for those couples who are experiencing difficulties becoming pregnant."

Professor Robertson says this is the first study of its kind in Australia and will increase our knowledge of the importance of [semen](#) for reproductive health, hopefully leading to improved treatments for

infertility and miscarriage.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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