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# The vitality of sperm is found to be waning in new research

BY MARLA CONE  
Los Angeles Times

Offering new evidence supporting a fiercely debated theory that male fertility is decreasing as a result of environmental pollution, researchers report today that average sperm counts of Parisian men have declined by one-third in the past 20 years.

The analysis of more than 1,300 healthy men at a Paris sperm bank confirms the findings of several other European studies that sperm volumes have decreased dramatically over the past 50 years. But the new report goes further by suggesting that the decline is a recent and ongoing phenomenon.

In their study published today in the New England Journal of Medicine, French doctors also noted a significant decrease in the vitality of the sperm.

"We conclude that there has been a true decline in the quality of semen during the past 20 years, since the characteristics of semen from a fertile man of a given age in 1992 were significantly poorer than those of a fertile man of the same age in 1973," the report says.

The findings, however, have triggered a high-profile debate among chemical fertility experts and reproductive scientists. Some remain skeptical that the decline

'There has been a true decline in the quality of semen during the past 20 years.'

in sperm is real, saying all the studies have faults that make it impossible to extrapolate the findings to the general population.

Dr. Earl Gray, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's chief of developmental reproduction and toxicology research, said the new evidence is persuasive, especially since it is unlikely that several research teams are wrong.

"This is about the fourth paper that's come out and reported that sperm counts are declining, each using a slightly different approach," said Gray, whose EPA laboratory researches the effects of hormone-like environmental pollutants. "It's really possible this is real."

The study adds weight to an

emerging but highly controversial theory that some pesticides and other chemicals that are widespread in the environment imitate estrogen or block testosterone in the womb, disrupting sexual development.

The French doctors said they do not know the cause of the apparent sperm decline, but since the loss coincides with use of modern chemicals this "could indicate factors affecting all the inhabitants of an area, such as the water supply or environmental pollution."

However, in an editorial in the New England Journal, Dr. Richard J. Sherins of Genetics and IVF Institute in Virginia, cautioned that the men studied were all sperm donors or men about to undergo vasectomies, so they may not represent the general population.

Sherins also said the studies may be inadequate because abstracted, age and other factors can make a major difference in sperm counts.

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