

NAME: SHEKONI OLUWASEYITAN

DEPARTMENT: BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING

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COURSE TITLE: HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY II (PHS 212)

ASSIGNMENT QUESTION: Discuss the factors facilitating the movement of sperm in the female reproductive tract

Sperm transport within the female reproductive tract is a cooperative effort between the functional properties of the sperm and seminal fluid on the one hand and cyclic adaptations of the female reproductive tract that facilitate the transport of sperm toward the ovulated egg.

The normal environment of the vagina is inhospitable to the survival of sperm, principally because of its low pH (<5.0). The low pH of the vagina is a protective mechanism for the woman against many sexually transmitted pathogens, because no tissue barrier exists between the vagina (outside) and the peritoneal cavity (inside). The acidic pH of the vagina is bacteriocidal and is the reflection of an unusual functional adaptation of the vaginal epithelium. Alone among the stratified squamous epithelia in the body, the cells of the vaginal lining contain large amounts of glycogen.

Anaerobic lactobacilli within the vagina break down the glycogen from shed vaginal epithelial cells, with the production of lactic acid as a byproduct. The lactic acid is responsible for the lowered vaginal pH.

Direct measurements have shown that within 8 seconds from the introduction of semen the pH of the upper vagina is raised from 4.3 to 7.2, creating an environment favorable for sperm motility.

Another rapid event is the coagulation of human semen through the actions of semogelin by a minute after coitus. The coagulative

function is incompletely understood, but it may play a role in keeping sperm near the cervical os. Thirty to 60 minutes after it coagulates, prostate-specific antigen (PSA), a proteolytic enzyme, degrades the coagulated semen. Within the semen and altered vaginal fluids, the sperm have begun to swim actively. A critical element in sperm motility is the availability of fructose, a nutrient provided by the seminal vesicles, within the semen. Because of their paucity of cytoplasm, spermatozoa require an external energy source. Unusually for most cells, spermatozoa have a specific requirement for fructose rather than glucose, the more commonly utilized carbohydrate energy source.

The next barrier facing sperm is the cervix. The cervical entrance (os) is not only very small, but it is blocked by cervical mucus. During most times in the menstrual cycle, cervical mucus is highly sticky (G mucus) and represents an almost impenetrable barrier to sperm penetration. Around the time of ovulation, however, the estrogenic environment of the female reproductive system brings about a change in cervical mucus, rendering it more watery and more amenable to penetration by sperm (E mucus).

The swimming speed of human sperm in fluid is approximately 5 mm/min, so in theory, sperm could swim through the cervical canal in a matter of minutes or hours. In reality, some sperm have been found in the upper reaches of the uterine tubes within minutes of coitus. These pioneers are likely to have been swept up the female reproductive tract during muscular contractions occurring at the time of or shortly after coitus.