

Acupuncture and the Treatment of Infertility

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The use of acupuncture to treat a variety of medical conditions is gaining more and more recognition in the West. Many people are getting more confident in the ability of acupuncture to treat these medical conditions. Fertility is one area that acupuncture can be used effectively. Infertility is defined as an inability for a woman to become pregnant after a year of unprotected intercourse. The rate of infertility has increased greatly as women have delayed their attempts to have children in their 30's and 40's. Increasing numbers of women have turned to both acupuncture and western methods of fertility enhancement to bear children. A landmark study by Paulus, et al. which was published in *Fertility and Sterility* Vol: 77, No. 4, April 2002, looked at the pregnancy rates of women undergoing IVF (*in vitro* fertilization). It demonstrated that women who were given acupuncture treatments using specific point protocols before and after ET (egg transfer) had a pregnancy rate of 42.5% as compared to the non-acupuncture group which had a pregnancy rate of 26.3%. A study done at the Reproductive Medicine and Fertility Center in Colorado Springs, also looked at 114 women undergoing IVF. Half of the women received acupuncture, with the other half receiving no acupuncture treatment. The study showed that 51% of the women in the acupuncture group became pregnant as compared to 36% in the control group who had not been given acupuncture. The study also showed that only 8% of the women receiving acupuncture had a miscarriage as compared to 20% in the control group. Dr. LF Liang, O.M.D., Ph.D., L.Ac., the author of the book *Acupuncture and IVF*, believes that herbal formulas and acupuncture can increase a woman's chance of getting pregnant.

Since ancient times, Chinese medicine has been used in China for the treatment of infertility of mankind. With the help of traditional Chinese medicine, a lot of couples can conceive children. Hundreds of infertile couples in China was able to become parents by using acupuncture and herbal medicine. At least 100 ancient Chinese medicine books recorded the fact (including formula and acupuncture points) that infertility can be treated by herbal medicine and acupuncture. Most Chinese scholars believe that Chinese medicine is one of the key factors why China has a very big population even with the one child per family policy since 1976. Today, while IUI and IVF are getting more and more popular in the western countries, most Chinese families who are not able to have children get help from Chinese medicine practitioners and succeed. IUI and IVF are only used in very few modern families.

Chinese medicine views the body and how it functions from a very different way as to how western medicine views it. Even with this difference, some rough correlations between the diagnosis of both medicines regarding infertility can be understood. Chinese medicine places great emphasis on the relative balances and concepts of Yin and Yang, Blood and Qi, Excess and Deficiency, Hot and Cold, Interior and Exterior. Imbalances of Blood and Qi, as detected by a skilled acupuncturist, may also be defined as anovulation, hormonal imbalances and blockages or growths in a women's reproductive anatomy, all of which may contribute to infertility. Chinese medicine believes that the proper flow of Qi (through the 14 main meridians) contributes to a healthy body. By placing needles in specific areas, the acupuncturist is able to increase the flow of Qi to an area if it is depleted of Qi and to reduce the blockages in the meridians which may have consequently caused the imbalances in the body functions. Studies have shown that acupuncture is thought to increase the flow of blood to the reproductive organs and also to help stabilize hormone levels. All of this will increase the chances for pregnancy by regulating ovarian function in women and improving the viability of sperm in men.

A number of studies have validated what too many women know. Inability to conceive a child can create high levels of emotional stress. Stress and the consequent release of stress hormones can have a negative impact on a normal menstrual cycle. Stress hormones have been found to cause the neurochemical imbalance of the brain. This in turn can then cause a negative impact on the pituitary gland, otherwise known as the master gland. The pituitary gland, which is located in the hypothalamus, secretes a number of hormones that are directly involved in the process of reproduction. FSH (Follicle Stimulating Hormone) stimulates the development of ovarian follicles (eggs) and the production of sperm in the testes of men. The pituitary also secretes LH (Luteinizing Hormone) which stimulates ovulation and the formation of the corpus luteum which is directly involved in the production of progesterone and estrogen in women. In the clinical study published in the *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine* June; 13(2): 115-9, acupuncture appears to be unable to stimulate ovulation as well as regulate ovulatory problems. The researchers found that acupuncture was able to increase progesterone levels and regulate FSH, LH and estrogen levels, all of which can have a positive effect on pregnancy rates. The production of these hormones and their levels can become effected when a woman is under stress. Proper balance of these hormones is key to a woman's ability to conceive. Acupuncture has been found to regulate all of these hormones by helping to balance the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis. Acupuncture, with it's ability to regulate and balance both reproductive and stress hormones, allows for a healthier menstrual cycle, thereby allowing a greater chance of fertility and pregnancy.

Studies have also demonstrated that acupuncture can be effective in treating males if low sperm count is the reason why the couple is unable to conceive. Statistics from the National Infertility Association, an organization also known as Resolve, states that 35-40% of all fertility issues are related to males. In the clinical study by Siterman et al., published in *Archives of Andrologia*, Jan 2000; 32 (1): 31-9, a definite increase in the sperm count was detected in 10 out of 15 males (67%) who were diagnosed with azoospermia. Azoospermia is defined as an absence of spermatozoa in the semen, even after a course of acupuncture treatment. The study revealed that the greatest increase in sperm count occurred

with males that had a history of genital tract inflammation. In the July issue of *Fertility and Sterility*, (Fertil Steril. 2005;84:141-147) a study done in China on 40 men with unexplained sperm abnormalities, demonstrated that acupuncture improved sperm concentration and motility and also increased testosterone and LH levels. This study also showed that acupuncture increase the number of normally shaped sperm and decrease the number of morphologically abnormal sperm in these men. Another study in China at the Guangzhou University of Traditional Chinese Medicine treated 29 male patients who suffered from impotence. Of those treated, 72% were considered cured. They were able to have normal sexual functions after the completion of the study.

Patients undergoing acupuncture for infertility are often given Chinese herbal formulas to further enhance their fertility. These formulas, many in use for thousands of years, work to balance a woman or man's hormonal system. These formulas are specifically tailored to the individual and the specific imbalance that has been identified. One study about 53 infertile women with luteal phase defect (LPD) utilized specific formulas during the different phases of their menstrual cycle. The women were treated for three cycles and a significant improvement was found in luteal function. 41% of these women were able to conceive after treatment.

Acupuncture is also a very cost effective method for many couples to bear children. One round of IVF can cost well over \$20,000 while acupuncture treatments range in price of only \$50 to \$100 per visit. Though some women may get pregnant sooner, most acupuncturists will recommend that a woman visit them once or twice a week (depending on different conditions of each individual) for the treatments of a minimum of 3 cycles. Some women, depending on the level of imbalance, may need up to half or a year of treatment to become pregnant. Still, as compared to the multiple IVF cycles that many women must endure, this is a relatively low-cost way of achieving pregnancy. The other benefit you may get from acupuncture, is that it can also help you to get a healthy and smart child.

After a woman has become pregnant, acupuncture throughout the first trimester is encouraged. It decreases the chance of miscarriage and helps to treat morning sickness, fatigue, low back pain.

An acupuncturist can also remind his patients on how to maintain a healthy diet. Some studies in China have shown that some kind of foods can affect the body's FSH level as well as sperm count and mobility. Finding an experienced acupuncturist who has comprehensive training in Chinese medicine is very important for a successful treatment. ●

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