

# Acupuncture and Infertility...the evidence is in our favour

Acupuncture works best when a functional problem is the cause of infertility, specifically when endometriosis, ovulatory problems or hormonal imbalances are the cause for not getting pregnant.

On the other hand, acupuncture has not been proven to be effective when structural problems, such as an improperly formed epididymis or a blocked fallopian tube, are the cause of infertility.

## Acupuncture and Female Infertility

Many women chose acupuncture infertility treatment either on its own or in conjunction with assisted reproductive technology (ART) procedures, such as IVF.

Studies have proved the effectiveness of acupuncture for infertility. A 2004 study conducted by the Reproductive Medicine and Fertility Centre in Colorado found that 51% of women who underwent both IVF and acupuncture treatment at the same time became pregnant, while only 36% of those who only underwent IVF did. The latter group also had higher rates of miscarriage stillbirth (20%) compared to those women who had received acupuncture (8%). Of all the alternative therapies, acupuncture has been shown in controlled scientific studies to be effective in helping treat male and female infertility problems. Acupuncture has, of course, traditionally been successfully employed in China to treat most illnesses, but , in recent years, there have been several interesting controlled scientific studies demonstrating the clinical value of acupuncture for both male and female infertility problems.

In one study of female infertility, 53 patients with Luteal phase defect (LPD) were treated with different Chinese medicinal herbs at different phases of menstrual cycle. The patients were treated for three menstrual cycles and there was significant improvement in the luteal phase of endometrium, and a tendency for normalization of the wave forms and its amplitude after the treatment. The findings suggested that Chinese herbal medicines capable of replenishing the Kidney could regulate the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis and thus improve the luteal function. Among the 53 cases, 22 (41.5%) conceived but 68.18% of them required other measures to preserve the pregnancy. (1)

Another study (2) involved 45 infertile women suffering from oligoamenorrhea ( 27 cases ) or luteal insufficiency (18 cases ). Following a complete gynaecologic--endocrinologic examination, the women were treated with auricular acupuncture (treatment of points on the ear). Results were compared to those of 45 women who received hormone treatment. Both groups were matched for age, duration of infertility, body mass index, previous pregnancies, menstrual cycle

and tubal patency. Women treated with acupuncture had 22 pregnancies whereas women treated with hormones had 20 pregnancies. It was also noted that side-effects were observed only during hormone treatment and various disorders of the autonomic nervous system normalized during acupuncture.

The study concluded that " auricular acupuncture seems to offer a valuable alternative therapy for female infertility due to hormone disorders" being more effective than hormone therapy and with no side effects.

### Acupuncture and Male Infertility

Men can also use acupuncture to treat their fertility problems, including erectile dysfunction or sperm health problems, such as low sperm count.

Also, a 2005 study conducted by Shanghai University in China found that acupuncture also helped treat male infertility. Of the men who participated, those who had acupuncture had an increased percentage of sperm in their semen; their sperm structure and morphology was also healthier than their counterparts who did not undergo acupuncture infertility treatment.

Acupuncture treatment has also been demonstrated to improve quantity and quality of sperm. (6) Another study in treating subfertility by acupuncture was carried out on 28 men. Each patient received a total of 10 treatments for a period of three weeks. Several spermograms were made and the spermograms and hormone levels were checked before and after acupuncture. Total count, concentration and motility were evaluated and in all cases the researchers observed a statistically significant improvement of sperm quality. (7) There is therefore little doubt that acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine would be an appropriate alternative treatment to consider for both male and female infertility.

## How Does Acupuncture Help Fertility?



Woman receiving acupuncture treatment.

Acupuncture is one of the most popular forms of alternative medicine used to improve fertility and possibly treat infertility. But how exactly is sticking little needles into the body supposed to help you get pregnant? How does it work?

### Answer:

There are two ways to answer this question. We can answer this question from the so-called Eastern perspective. In other words, with what traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) say about acupuncture and fertility. We can also answer the question from the Western point of view: What does the medical research suggest about acupuncture? How can acupuncture help those with infertility?

### How Acupuncture May Work, According to Traditional Chinese Medicine

According to classical Chinese philosophy, we have channels of "energy" called meridians that run through our bodies. They are often compared to rivers running through the body, in order to nourish the tissues. Stagnation in the flow of these energy rivers is like a dam that is backed up.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, disruption of the flow can lead to physical and emotional illnesses, including infertility. These meridians can be affected by needling specific points, also known as acupuncture points. By needling the acupuncture points, the flow of the energy gets "unstuck" and is allowed to flow in a free and balanced way.

### **How Acupuncture May Work, According to the Current Research**

Of course, the Western, scientific explanation is quite different. The truth of the matter is that no one is sure how acupuncture works. But there are theories.

One theory is that by needling points on the body, chemicals and hormones are triggered and released. These chemicals either change the experience of pain, or they trigger a cascade of chemicals and hormones which influence the body's own internal regulating system. The improved energy flow and biochemical balance produced by acupuncture stimulates the body's natural healing abilities, and enhances physical and emotional well-being."

Research has shown specifically that acupuncture increases the amount of beta-endorphins flowing through the body. Beta-endorphins are feel-good hormones that help lessen pain. Exercise is also known to boost the amount of beta-endorphins in the body. If you've ever experienced a "runner's high," you've enjoyed a boost of beta-endorphins.

But some interesting research on acupuncture points may imply that it's more than just beta-endorphins and hormones at play. In a research study at UC Irvine, researchers used MRIs to look at the brain while patients received acupuncture treatment.

Traditionally, acupuncturists have used a point on the little toe to address eye pain. The point is chosen because it is on the same meridian as the eye." What's amazing is that in this study, when the point on the foot for eye pain was stimulated, the part of the brain that regulates vision lit up.

### **Acupuncture and Infertility**

The research on acupuncture and infertility is ongoing, and the topic is controversial. Some studies have been too small to prove a definitive connection to improved pregnancy rates, and some studies contradict each other in their results.

With that said, here are a few of possible benefits of acupuncture, according to the preliminary research:

- Improved pregnancy rates during IVF treatment cycles, when acupuncture takes place on the day of embryo transfer
- Increased blood flow to the uterus, leading to an improved endometrial lining
- Reduced stress and anxiety levels
- Possible improvement in ovulation for women with PCOS
- Possible improvement in sperm count and quality in men with infertility
- Possible regulation of gonadotropin-releasing hormone which in turn could help regulate ovulation

In order to witness the benefits of acupuncture, the individual should undergo treatment once or twice weekly for a period of many months. It is normal for the patient to undergo up to 12 rounds of acupuncture treatment. Each session is roughly 40 minute long and should include time to discuss the patients current condition, as well as what the patient can do at home to further mitigate her condition.