

Acupuncture and Fertility

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a long history of treating women's health problems, with texts from 200 BC describing medicinal plants to treat infertility. Today, Traditional Chinese medicine specialists have adapted and incorporated these traditional applications into modern fertility treatment; these two forms of medicine are especially complementary. This has resulted in clinical feedback and research suggesting that acupuncture is capable of significantly enhancing fertility.

Acupuncture offers women and their partners the opportunity to prepare for conception through optimizing their health. This can be directed at specific health problems such as PCOS, endometriosis, and irregular menstrual cycles, as well as general health problems such as stress. TCM aims through the use of acupuncture, herbs, and lifestyle advice to achieve the following:

Regulate the woman's hormonal cycle:

- ♣ A regular 28 to 30 day cycle with good quality fertile mucus, pain free ovulation mid-cycle, no premenstrual symptoms, and a pain free period with efficient bleeding indicates a balanced hormonal cycle.

Improve the quality of a woman's fertile mucus

- ♣ Fertile mucus appears several days prior to ovulation and is required to help nourish the sperm and guide it to the egg.

Regulate ovulation:

- ♣ An ovulation occurring on day 13 to 15 of a cycle indicates that the egg is being released at its optimal developmental time.

Promote an efficient menstrual bleed

- ♣ In TCM, the menstrual bleeding reflects the quality of the uterine lining. This lining appears important for implantation as women with poor endometrial development have an association with IVF failure or recurrent miscarriage.
- ♣ Chinese medicine aims to increase the thickness and quality of this lining; it does this through promoting corpus luteal function (which in turn produces progesterone) and through its documented action of increasing blood flow to the uterus (Human Reproduction 11:1314-1317)
- ♣ Ideally it is expected that a woman will experience menstrual bleeding for at least 3 to 5 days and that this blood flow will be red in color without any clotting or flooding.

Enhance the internal environment of the fallopian tubes.

- ♣ TCM aims to improve the elasticity and the secretions of the fallopian tubes, facilitating the passage of the fertilized egg into the uterus.

Enhance egg development.

- ♣ While the genetic material for a woman's eggs are created when the woman is herself an embryo, the process of the egg maturing comes under the influence of her hormones.
- ♣ Clinically it also appears possible to influence the integrity of the eggs released following acupuncture treatment; this may be due to increasing the blood supply to the developing follicles or by increasing the nutritional supply to the egg via the fluids that surround and nourish it.

Improve sperm quality:

Normal sperm count values are currently given as;

- ♣ greater than 20 million sperm per ml
- ♣ greater than 50% of sperm moving vigorously (motility)
- ♣ greater than 14 % with no deformities (morphology).

A population study looking at men's fertility found that those men that succeeded in fathering a child had

- ♣ greater than 48 million sperm per ml
- ♣ a motility of more than 63%
- ♣ a normal morphology of 12% (New England Journal of Medicine 345(19):1388-1393).

This study indicates the importance of men achieving the highest sperm count and motility possible.

Promote embryo implantation

- ♣ In a study acupuncture used during IVF at the time of egg retrieval and embryo resulted in a significantly higher viable pregnancy rate. (Fertility and Sterility 74(4):721-72). In this study 160 women undergoing IVF were monitored. The success rate in the acupuncture group was 42.5% compared to a 26.3% success rate in the group of women that did not receive acupuncture.
- ♣ In a study of 114 women at the Reproductive Medicine and Fertility Center in Colorado Springs (American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) October 2004) half of the women received acupuncture prior to and following embryo replacement.
- ♣ The women who received acupuncture had a 51% pregnancy rate compared to 36% in control group and a 08% miscarriage rate compared to 20% in control group.

Acupuncture also was found to reduce the risk of tubal pregnancy and increase the live birth rate. The live birth rate for each IVF cycle was 23 % higher than the cycles for the control group.

References

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Research Compiled by Debra Betts author of "The Essential Guide to Acupuncture in Pregnancy and Childbirth" © 2006