

## ACUPUNCTURE, STRESS, AND IN VITRO FERTILIZATION

**For many women who are struggling to conceive a baby,** the practice of acupuncture, a form of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has proven to be a successful enhancement to Western reproductive protocols such as InVitro Fertilization (IVF). While not universally accepted, over the past decade the number of infertility specialists who publicly acknowledge the benefits of this age old practice has skyrocketed.



Acupuncture refers to the administering of disposable, one time use needles which are hair-fine and flexible. These needles are inserted into specific areas of the body which are lined up along pathways called meridians. Meridians exist both on the inside and outside of the body. The needles remain in place for a short period of time and most women report that little, if any, discomfort is associated with the process. The underlying theory is that when meridians are needled, bodily functions can be regulated, and thus corrected.

Researchers have identified that acupuncture causes the body to release beta-endorphins and enkephalins in the brain and spinal area<sup>1</sup>. When these natural opioids are released, hormonal and other bodily systems are better regulated and the person being treated becomes more relaxed. In addition, acupuncture is known to increase blood flow, which stimulates the ovaries to produce healthy eggs as well as enriching the endometrial lining, thus supporting implantation<sup>2</sup>.

**One way in which acupuncture differs from traditional infertility treatment is an ideological one.** Traditional Chinese Medicine represents a holistic approach to health, meaning that the whole body, not just the reproductive organs, is taken into account. For example, in TCM, the kidney is considered to be the internal organ responsible for the reproductive cycle, including growth, and also the aging process. If kidney energy becomes depleted by, for example, poor diet or stress, one of the possible outcomes is thought to be infertility.

While acupuncture does not offer a cure for specific types of infertility, it may be of great benefit to individuals who are currently trying to conceive either naturally, or through the use of various forms of assisted reproductive technology, including IVF. Recent studies show a number of benefits among patients who received acupuncture during their IVF cycles, including stress reduction, relaxation, regulation of menstrual cycles and emotional stamina,<sup>3</sup> as well as greatly enhanced psychological coping<sup>4</sup>.

Acupuncture is not without its critics, however. Other studies<sup>5</sup> have indicated less than favorable results. However, for those who tout the synergy of East and West for the treatment of infertility, positive benefits of acupuncture are thought to include:

- Circulation of blood flow in the pelvic cavity
- Improvement of ovulation
- Improvement of uterine lining thickness
- Relaxation of uterus and diminishment or cessation of uterine contractions
- Promotion of follicle production
- Reduction of inflammation
- Relaxation and stress reduction through modulation of endorphine release
- Promotion of overall health, both mental and physical

**If you decide to fold acupuncture into your treatment protocol, be sure to let your current physician know of your decision and also, make sure that your acupuncturist is apprised of any assisted reproductive technologies you are currently pursuing as well.**

The acupuncturist you choose to care for you should be one that is licensed, and well versed with acupuncture infertility treatment. It may also make your life easier if your acupuncturist and physician know each other and routinely share patients within their practices who are trying to conceive. There is much anecdotal evidence that many women who found themselves unable to get pregnant through IVF alone, as well as others who were unsuccessful getting pregnant through the use of acupuncture alone, found that the combination of the two systems worked together beautifully and that they were finally able to achieve the success that eluded them before. If this feels like the right choice for you, make sure that if possible, the health care providers you choose, both East and West, are able to work together beautifully as well.

## END NOTES

1. Attain Health Desk. 30 November 2010. <http://www.attainfertility.com/article/acupuncture-fertility>.
2. Ibid.
3. Bovey, M., Lorenc A., et al. 29 November 2010. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20452588>
4. Kovarova P., Smith CA., et al. 29 November 2010. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20832766>
5. El-Toukhy T., Khalaf Y. 27 November 2010. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20650689>

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