



To the Point

Acupuncture for Conception

By Carma Haley Shoemaker

Many women are on an emotional roller coaster of sadness, frustration, anger and disappointment as a result of their fertility difficulties. To make things worse, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine states that the stress resulting from such turmoil has been shown in many instances to actually further decrease fertility. However, there is new evidence that acupuncture, an ancient Chinese form of medicinal healing, may increase fertility and help women to become pregnant without undergoing costly and painful procedures.

What Is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a therapy based on ancient Chinese philosophy. The practice of acupuncture is fairly widespread and is used by both medically and non-medically trained persons. The technique involves the puncturing of the skin with needles to achieve therapeutic benefit and is based upon the belief that the human body is subject to disease when there are imbalances in the level of invisible life forces.

The needles are used to stimulate various points located over the body, and by this means the body's balance can be restored. The needles are usually inserted and twirled and may be left in for short periods. The points chosen for stimulation depend upon the patient's symptoms, the season, the weather and the result of taking the pulse at the wrist. Some modern practitioners use low-level laser light instead of needles.

Why Acupuncture?

Eunice Simmons, L.Ac., a licensed acupuncturist at Oasis Day Spa in Manhattan, N.Y., sees about 20 patients per week for infertility and has had about a 99 percent success rate using acupuncture to facilitate full-term pregnancies. According to Simmons, an increasing number of women are taking this alternative route in lieu of choosing in-vitro fertilization (IVF). "Women are becoming sick and tired of the invasive option of IVF," she says. "IVF is also quite expensive and is not guaranteed to work."

According to Dr. Evelyn Feng of Champion Medical Services also in Manhattan, some American women, in particular those who have delayed childbearing in order to establish a career and/or relationship, would certainly stand to benefit from acupuncture therapy. "In the 21st century, women are often depleted of kidney Qi (energy) and have constrained liver Qi that causes blockages, particularly in the pelvis area," she says. "Early in a woman's life, these blockages may have presented themselves as painful menstrual cramps, endometriosis, fibroid tumors, PMS symptoms, etc. Now these disharmonies may result in difficulties conceiving at any point in the reproductive cycle including the production of the egg, fertilization and implantation in the uterus."

Simmons shares that it is essentially the manipulation of the flow of Qi that aids in conception. "The Qi is manipulated by using between three and 15 small needles that go just beneath the surface of the skin at specific points of the body," she says. "These points are called meridians or pathways that allow energy to flow through the body. The acupuncturist will place the needles along the spleen and stomach meridians in an effort to stimulate the blood flow and direct energy to the uterus. In addition,

many may supplement the procedure with Chinese herbs – which are safe for both Mom and Baby – to nourish, support and strengthen the Qi to the vital fluids and internal organs which enhances the possibility of conception and carrying the baby a full term."

Why Does It Work?

According to Feng, the reason that acupuncture works may always remain somewhat of a mystery. "Regardless of the 'why,' its outstanding success rate and affordable costs seem to have women overjoyed with the outcome of this minimally invasive procedure that may soon make it common for women to have babies well into middle-age," she says.

One of the most noticeable differences between other methods and acupuncture is cost. "Three IVF procedures, the common number of attempts required, usually cost upwards of \$90,000," says Feng. "Acupuncture on the other hand, costs about \$75 per treatment and is done once a week for three to eight months. Once a woman does become pregnant she should continue acupuncture throughout her entire pregnancy, ensuring that she carries to full term."

Not all women who have trouble conceiving are good candidates for medical acupuncture. According to Feng, the presence of a physical defect, deformity or dysfunction may be enough to prevent the use of acupuncture. "People who have a functional, rather than a structural reason for infertility are appropriate candidates for acupuncture," says Feng. "For example, damaged fallopian tubes are structural, but nonfunctioning ovaries is functional. Women with functional infertility or unexplained infertility would be encouraged to try at least 10 visits."

The practice of acupuncture can be used at any time during a woman's cycle or pregnancy, and the treatments are modified accordingly. While some specific points and herbs are contraindicated when trying to conceive or during pregnancy, Heather Lounsbury, L.Ac., a licensed acupuncturist from Santa Monica, Calif., says that the acupuncture treatments in general are not.

"Traditional Chinese medicine can be used to help prepare the body for a health pregnancy and child," she says. "There are also treatments for morning sickness and the actual delivery. Depending on an individual's condition, one might need acupuncture treatments twice a week for several weeks or months. However, if a woman has a history of miscarriage, it is important to receive acupuncture throughout the pregnancy. In many cases, it only takes one menstrual cycle to achieve success."

It is ideal to use a physician who is fully trained in acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. In some places, it may be necessary to conduct almost 4000 hours of school and training to receive this certification. "A good way to find someone who specializes in fertility is to contact www.acupuncturetoday.com," says Lounsbury. "They have articles written by those who specialize in fertility and gynecology. An physician who specializes in fertility may also have a referral list. And many licensed acupuncturists have contact lists of colleagues who specialize in conception in various cities all over the country. There is sure to be one in your area."