

## Acupuncture for Infertility

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### **Infertility:**

If you have been trying to conceive a child for at least 1 year without success, most doctors would diagnose you with infertility. You are not alone; according to the American Pregnancy Association, infertility currently affects about 6.1 million people in the U.S.

### **Options for Infertile Couples:**

Many couples turn to the latest medical technologies to assist them, such as ovulation-promoting drugs, intra-uterine insemination, and in vitro fertilization (IVF). These are collectively known as Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). In vitro fertilization is an incredible technology that has led to many successful pregnancies. However, it is not an easy path to choose: it is a very complex procedure, it is quite expensive, and most find it emotionally difficult. And, the success rates are still relatively low (generally 10% to 35%). If you decide to invest your time and money into these therapies, you want to be sure you are giving yourself every advantage possible. Adding acupuncture to your ART can significantly increase your chances of success.

If ART is not for you, due to financial, medical or other reasons, or, if you wish to try something less invasive/expensive first, acupuncture is equally (if not more) valuable to you, for both female and male factor infertility.

### **Acupuncture with ART:**

Increasing numbers of research studies in medical journals are demonstrating that impressive results are achieved when acupuncture is combined with Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). A landmark study published in the *Fertility and Sterility* journal (April 2002) caught the attention of many reproductive specialists. It showed that women undergoing embryo transfer (performed with in-vitro fertilization) who received acupuncture had a 42.5% success rate, compared with the 26.3% success rate of those who did not get acupuncture. (Paulus 2002)

Another study involving 225 IVF/ICSI patients found that real acupuncture (performed according to the principles of Oriental medicine) during the luteal-phase of the cycle (the 12 to 14 days following ovulation) more than doubled both the clinical and ongoing pregnancy rates, as compared to placebo acupuncture: 33.6% vs. 15.6% in clinical pregnancy rates, and 28.4% vs. 13.8% in ongoing pregnancy rates. The researchers concluded that real acupuncture during the luteal-phase has a positive effect on the outcome of IVF/ICSI. (Deiterle 2006)

A third study involving acupuncture with 273 IVF patients discovered that acupuncture on the day of embryo transfer (with treatment performed both before and after the transfer) increased the clinical pregnancy rates from 26% to 39%, and the ongoing pregnancy rates from 22% to 36%. The researchers' conclusion was that "acupuncture on the day of embryo transfer significantly improves the reproduction outcome of IVF, compared with no acupuncture." (Westergaard 2006)

### **Acupuncture for infertility, without ART:**

Acupuncture has been treating infertility without ART therapies for over 3000 years. Consider that throughout history in Chinese culture the inability to have a child, especially a son, was considered the worst kind of tragedy. When infertility afflicted a couple, there was a lot of motivation for Chinese physicians to develop effective treatments.

Only recently has Western science begun to conduct studies on acupuncture for infertility:

One study compared women with endocrine dysfunctional infertility: one group was put on the drug clomiphene (Clomid) and the other was treated with acupuncture. The result was 45% pregnancy rate in the Clomid group, and 65% in the acupuncture group, concluding that “acupuncture can cure endocrine dysfunctional infertility.” (Yang 2005)

Other studies show that acupuncture has been found to stimulate ovulation, reduce the impedance of blood flow to the uterus, normalize dysfunction of the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis, and treat endocrine dysfunctional infertility. (Yang 2005, Chen 1997, Mo 1993, Stener-Victorin 2006)

And, last, but not least, there are numerous studies citing the benefits of acupuncture for male factor infertility. Acupuncture increases the number and ratio of normal-form sperm; significantly decreases the number of anti-sperm antibodies (AsAb) in male immune infertility, and increases the quick sperm motility. (Zhang 2002, Gurfinkel 2003, Fu 2005, Dong 2006)

### **Why does Acupuncture work?**

Why does acupuncture and Oriental Medicine work for infertility? From a Western medicine point of view, physician-scientists at Cornell Medical Center report that acupuncture increases the blood flow to the uterus; it increases endorphin levels, which in turn effects the release of a gonadotropin-releasing hormone involved in regulating reproduction; it lowers the stress hormones that can be responsible for infertility; it impacts the plasma levels of the fertility hormones; it normalizes the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis, which is essential for proper hormonal balance; and it positively effects women with polycystic ovarian syndrome. (Robinson & Hickenbottom 2003)

From an Oriental Medicine viewpoint, acupuncture is effective for infertility because it helps to relieve stress, correct imbalances and ensure proper communication in the body. It increases the circulation of energy and blood to the necessary organs and glands, so that they are stronger, work better, and communicate with each other more completely.

### **Recommended Acupuncture Treatment Protocol:**

In general, I recommend acupuncture treatments weekly for 4-6 weeks followed by twice monthly, combined with Chinese herbs, until pregnancy. For those patients whose MD's have requested that they not take herbs during their ART, I recommend once or twice weekly acupuncture treatments. These protocols are the same for both men and women.

For best chances of success with ART, acupuncture treatment should begin 3 months prior to any major procedure. If this schedule is not possible for you, aim to get treatments for as many weeks as possible before the procedure begins.

### **What to expect from Acupuncture for Infertility:**

In my clinic, I have found that acupuncture can:

1. Regulate menstrual cycles: Often infertility is associated with irregular menstrual cycles or endometriosis. With acupuncture and herbs I have seen women without regular periods start cycling regularly again, women with heavy bleeding normalize, and partial and complete recoveries from endometriosis.
2. Increase ovulation rates: Related to irregular menstruation, some infertility patients simply are not ovulating regularly. With only acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, one specific patient has been ovulating consistently for 7 months, after more than 12 years of negative ovulation readings!
3. Increase the number and quality of eggs that are ovulated: After 2 months of acupuncture, one IVF patient produced 15 healthy eggs that were extracted; that is

nearly double her first IVF cycle, without acupuncture, when she produced 8 healthy eggs.

Another patient, with a history of repeated miscarriages, was told by her infertility specialist that she could never use her own eggs to have a baby. It was his professional opinion that her eggs were too poor quality for her to get pregnant naturally and keep the child; she would have to do IVF with donor eggs. After 3 months of acupuncture and herbal medicine, she became pregnant naturally, and, at the time of this writing, is due to give birth in 2 weeks.

4. Increase the chances of implantation: Acupuncture helps to relax the uterus, so that implantation is more likely. Often, in IVF, the embryo transfer process stimulates uterine contractions, which can make implantation difficult. This is why studies find that acupuncture on the day of embryo transfer increases success rates significantly.
5. Increase the chances of a healthy, full-term pregnancy: Continued acupuncture treatment for at least the first 12 weeks of pregnancy is highly recommended to decrease chances of miscarriage (Berkley). It's also useful for morning sickness, fatigue and mood swings.

### **Conclusion:**

The journey to overcome infertility can be a very difficult one. It makes sense to be sure that you are giving yourself every advantage. Whether you choose to receive ART or not, you can feel confident that including acupuncture in your plan will increase your chances of having the baby you want.

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