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Acupuncture & Fertility

Getting Pregnant

Infertility, or the inability to conceive a child, is a problem facing many couples. According to the Food and Drug Administration's Office of Women's Health, about 6.1 million Americans, roughly 9% of adults in their childbearing years, are infertile. Infertility is difficult to diagnose precisely. If a couple has tried unsuccessfully to conceive for a year or more, infertility is suspected.

Physiologically (though not always socially), the ideal time for a woman to give birth is from ages 18 to 20. Chances of a woman getting pregnant lessen significantly as she reaches her mid 30s, with a precipitous drop in fertility at age 40 and over. Women lose the ability to have children after menopause, which normally occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, though some women may have "premature menopause" at age 40 or younger. Menopause is the term for the time when a woman stops menstruating, signaling an end to childbearing.

Though a man's sperm production decreases after age 25, men are capable of fathering children 20 or even 30 years past the age when most women reach menopause. This is because a man's body produces sperm on a regular basis, while women are born with all the eggs they will have in a lifetime. Sperm therefore is "fresh," while a woman's eggs are as old as she is. As women age, eggs die off. Those that survive are more likely to have chromosomal abnormalities, resulting in a greater chance for miscarriage or birth defects, the most common being Down syndrome. Down syndrome, a combination of mental retardation and physical abnormalities, is caused by the presence of an extra chromosome. At age 25 a woman has about a 1 in 1,250 chance of having a Down syndrome child; by age 35, her chances are 1 in 1,000; by age 40, she has a 1 in 100 chance of having a Down syndrome child. By age 45 the chance of a Down baby increases significantly to 1 in 30. Therefore, though a woman may be physically fit and appear young at age 45, her eggs are also 45 years old and less likely to be fertilized and carried to term as a healthy baby.

Possible reasons for female infertility include blocked fallopian tubes, dysfunctional ovaries, an endocrine imbalance, endometriosis, failure to ovulate or irregular menstrual cycles, cervical mucus that is chemically "hostile" to sperm, and physical abnormalities. Sexually transmitted diseases can also result in both male and female sterility.

Contrary to popular belief, infertility is not a “female disorder.” In approximately 30% of cases the man is infertile, while an additional 20% of cases show both the man and the women have problems affecting conception. Thus in about half the cases of infertility, the problem is at least partly the man's. A few potential reasons for male infertility are hormone dysfunction, low sperm count, poor sperm motility, enlarged prostate, the after-effects of x-rays or mumps, and exposure of the testicles to high temperatures -- and yes, when conception is the goal, boxers are preferred to briefs, and men should and avoid hot baths, saunas and spas.

Western medicine is only now beginning to realize what Acupuncturists have known for centuries: acupuncture is remarkably effective in increasing fertility in both men and women. The fertility-boosting benefits of acupuncture are numerous. A paper written by medical professors who specialize in infertility at New York's esteemed Weill Cornell medical center, published in *FERTILITY AND STERILITY* in December 2002, lists these benefits to fertility in women:



- Increased blood flow to the uterus and therefore uterine wall thickness, an important marker for fertility;
- Increased endorphin production, which, in turn, has been shown to effect the release of a gonadotrophin-releasing hormone (GnRH), a decapeptide involved in regulating reproduction;
- Lower stress hormones responsible for infertility;
- Impact on plasma levels of the fertility hormones: follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), luteinizing hormone (LH), estradiol (E2), and Progesterone (P);
- Normalization of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis, a key process in fertility;
- A positive effect for women with polycystic ovarian syndrome, a hormonal imbalance present in three percent of adolescents and adults.

In addition, a 2003 study conducted by the Department of Reproductive Medicine at the Christian-Lauritzen-Institut in Ulm, Germany, showed pregnancies achieved by in vitro fertilization in conjunction with acupuncture at 42.5%, as opposed to 26.3% with in vitro alone.

Men dealing with infertility can benefit from acupuncture treatments as well. A 1996 study, published in the *Journal of Chinese Medicine*, involved 54 men undergoing acupuncture treatment for infertility. 55.6% of the subjects experienced a “cure,” while another 24.07% improved. The overall effective rate, confirmed in laboratory studies, was 79.63%. Many studies of acupuncture fertility treatment in men show increased sperm count and motility in roughly 67% of patients. Unfortunately, western medical research on acupuncture treatment of male infertility is minimal compared to research on female infertility. There is still a bias against women when it comes to fertility problems.

Chinese herbal formulations can be very helpful when used with acupuncture for the treatment of infertility. Nuan Gong Yun Zi Wan is taken by women, while Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan is indicated in men. Another herbal formula, simply known as “Infertility Pills,” can be used by both men and women.

Infertility is an issue affecting many couples. Oftentimes it can be overcome through the aid of acupuncture. There are other more invasive, tremendously expensive procedures available, and often they can be helpful. Still, it is always a good idea to try minimally-invasive, inexpensive acupuncture before or in conjunction with other fertility treatments. Acupuncture has been shown in many studies to boost fertility in both men and women, and to complement western medical procedures such as IVF.

