

Infertility and Chinese Medicine

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Traditional Chinese medicine has a long history of use in treating infertility, for both men and women. It can be useful in any phase of pregnancy planning, whether it is in the early stages of trying to get pregnant, or after several years of unsuccessful efforts. Chinese medicine can also increase the success of conventional Western procedures such as *in vitro* fertilization or intracytoplasmic sperm injection.

One of the strengths of Chinese medicine is that it addresses a problem not by trying to attack or suppress it, but by regulating various systems in the body. Acupuncture has been shown to affect the autonomic nervous system, relax sympathetic nerve activity, relax blood vessels, lower blood pressure, and reduce levels of norepinephrine, the “stress” hormone and neurotransmitter. This is why people feel calm and relaxed after an acupuncture treatment. Most cases of female infertility involve disturbance of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis that regulates ovulation. The ability of acupuncture to regulate this hormonal axis accounts, in large part, for its effectiveness in treating infertility. In a study evaluating the use of acupuncture in inducing ovulation in women with polycystic ovarian syndrome, the percentage of ovulatory cycles was shown to improve from 15% to 66%.¹ Irregularities in the hormonal system account for most causes of infertility, but fallopian tube abnormalities, and uterine and cervical factors are other causes. Successful treatment is most likely for infertility cases with hormonal irregularity in the cause, but even the most difficult of cases have been treated with Chinese medicine.

One of the other strengths of Chinese medicine is that each person is treated as an individual with a unique constitutional makeup. This is why ten different patients, each with fertility problems, will likely be given different acupuncture treatments and herbal formulas. From the Western medical perspective, the cause of infertility might be a hormonal imbalance, or a blocked Fallopian tube, but from the Chinese perspective, the cause will be determined to arise out of a pattern of deficiency or excess, too much cold or heat, or because of stagnation of blood, energy, or dampness. These concepts might seem a bit strange, but the thousands of years of practice of Chinese medicine has systemized these concepts into a highly effective system of diagnosis and treatment. For example, if a woman with fertility problems was diagnosed as having excess heat in the blood (usually manifesting in excess uterine bleeding), then the practitioner will choose an acupuncture treatment and herbs with a predominately cooling nature. Since it is not healthy for the body to swing violently in one direction, care would be taken to ensure that the treatment is cooling, but not too much. The treatment would be moderated with a few strategically chosen acupuncture points and herbs that have a gently warming nature. In addition, dietary and exercise suggestions might be made. This emphasis on balance is one of the reasons why Chinese medicine is so gentle, yet effective. When the body is in balance, health is restored.

¹ Raymond Chang, M.D., Pak Chung, M.D., & Zev Rosenwaks, M.D., “Role of Acupuncture in Treatment of Female Infertility,” *Fertility and Sterility*, vol 78, issue 6, Dec. 2002, p. 1149-1153

When treating a patient, an acupuncturist usually chooses about eight acupuncture points—places where needles are inserted—among the hundreds of acupuncture points on the body. Those points are chosen for the intended affect they will have on the body. For example, in a study on the use of acupuncture in women undergoing *in vitro* fertilization, three acupuncture points were chosen because they would result in better blood flow in the uterus, three other points were used to help sedate and calm the patient, one point would directly influence the uterus, and another would stabilize the endocrine (hormonal) system. The goal was to nourish the uterus, balance the hormonal system, and help relax the patient. It is believed that acupuncture is helpful in these cases because it increases blood flow to the uterus, which increases endometrial thickness, and therefore increases the chance of success of *in vitro* implantation. The conclusion of the study: “the results demonstrate that acupuncture therapy improves pregnancy rate.”²

About 30% of cases of infertility involve men, and Chinese medicine can treat male infertility as well. In a 2000 study, infertile males were treated with acupuncture two times a week for five weeks. Those receiving acupuncture had increases in sperm viability, integrity, motility, and in the amount of functional sperm. There was a distinct increase in sperm count following acupuncture therapy for 65% of the treated males. Furthermore, of those who initially had no sperm, 76% had live sperm following acupuncture treatment.³

The length of treatment required to treat male and female infertility varies depending on the cause of the infertility. Many people respond after a few months of regular hour-long treatments, once or twice a week, along with dedicated usage of recommended Chinese herbal formulas. In some instances, however, successful treatment of infertility many take at least a year, and requires patience. Used alone, or as an adjunct to increase the success of Western medical treatments, Chinese medicine is a relatively inexpensive, non-toxic, and gentle way to treat infertility.

² Wolfgang E. Paulus, M.D., et al, “Influence of acupuncture on the pregnancy rate in patients who undergo assisted reproduction therapy,” *Fertility and Sterility*, vol. 77, issue 4, April 2002, p. 721 – 724.

³ S. Siterman, et. Al., “Does acupuncture treatment affect sperm density in males with very low sperm count? A pilot study,” *Andrologia*, vol. 32, issue 1, p. 31, Jan. 2000

