

Natural Approaches to Problems of Fertility

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You may notice the term “infertility” was not used in the title of this article. I believe the term alone causes a psychological “block” telling us as women *and* men (because the problem can be related to either sex) that conception is impossible. This message leads to stress, negative beliefs and anxiety. As more and more studies confirm, there is a strong link between the beliefs, attitudes and stresses of the mind and body and the ability to conceive. A study in San Diego, published in *Fertility and Sterility*, found women who expressed negative emotions prior to starting IVF were 93 per cent *less* likely to conceive than those who maintained a positive attitude. So, I begin by telling my patients they have problems or challenges with fertility; that the concept of pregnancy and childbearing is not impossible (unless there is a literal physiological reason a woman or man cannot conceive).

In East Asian Medicine the approach to any disease or disorder is to address the person involved in his/her entirety. This means all aspects of life are reviewed, and many arenas may need adjustment. Fertility is no different. Lifestyle choices such as diet, stress, sleep patterns, work, etc. are reviewed and adjusted accordingly. Typically, weekly acupuncture appointments and daily herbs are prescribed (these are general guidelines for treatment and may be adjusted according to each individual’s circumstances).

Dietary changes are often necessary in our processed, refined, sugared culture. Other healthy practices such as Yoga, meditation and/or cardiovascular exercise are often recommended to help reduce stress and regulate one’s Qi (pronounced like cheese without the “se”) – also referred to as energy.

Some general guidelines for men to enhance fertility include: Reducing stress; wearing loose fitting underwear; avoiding alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, x-rays, steroids and increased heat in the genital area; regular cardiovascular exercise; getting enough rest and sleep. Men can supplement their diet with zinc-rich foods, such as pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds to increase sperm count and motility (*The Infertility Diet*, Reiss, F.).

Some general guidelines for women to enhance fertility include: Avoiding alcohol, caffeine and tobacco; reducing stress, eating soups rich with whole grains, vegetables and small amounts of meat; various forms of exercise dependent upon their East Asian Medical diagnosis; getting enough rest and sleep.

While large studies do not yet abound regarding East Asian Medicine’s efficacy with infertility, it has been used for thousands of years with success and smaller studies are beginning to support the abundant anecdotal evidence. Some recent studies have shown acupuncture and herbs can increase blood flow to the uterus, thereby increasing the likelihood of pregnancy (conducted at Cornell and UCLA). Others have shown acupuncture can restore normalcy to the endocrine system, triggering ovulation. In a small but significant study in Germany (*Fertility and Sterility*, 2002), 80 IVF patients

received acupuncture treatments both before and after embryonic transfer; 50 per cent of the women receiving acupuncture conceived while the control group had a 26 per cent success rate. Relaxation and stress reduction, a common effect of acupuncture, is key in increasing fertility and for an overall improvement in quality of life.

In addition, acupuncture and herbs are significantly more cost effective and less “toxic” than the “conventional” western medical treatments but can be simultaneously used with these therapies if the patient decides to pursue both modalities. It has also been my experience that using East Asian Medicine in conjunction with Western Medicine decreases the short and long-term side-effects of hormone-based fertility treatments while increasing effectiveness.

Knowing there are natural options to further assist you during this stressful and exciting time can help you feel more in control throughout the process and increase your health and well-being.

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