

## **In Vitro Fertilization: How Acupuncture Can Help**

**by Richard Blitstein L.Ac., MSTOM**

Chinese medicine has been using herbs and acupuncture to successfully treat fertility issues in China for over 2,000 years with great success. For various cultural and religious reasons fertility is a very important issue for the Chinese and today hundreds of thousands of Chinese couples turn to Traditional Chinese Medicine for help. In the last few years many couples in the United States have sought the help of Traditional Chinese Medicine for their fertility issues as well. Recently a number of scientific studies have shown how traditional Chinese medicine treatment can affect fertility both in women being treated solely with acupuncture as well as those undergoing western medical treatment.

One of these studies showed that acupuncture greatly increased the success rate for invitro fertilization (IVF) procedures. In this study, published in the international scientific journal Fertility and Sterility, 160 women were divided into two groups. The first group received acupuncture before and after embryo transfer. The second group had the embryo transfer without acupuncture. The pregnancy rate for the acupuncture group was 42.5% while in the non-acupuncture group it was only 26.3%. This study shows that acupuncture can improve in vitro success rates by 62 % in some cases.

With patients I have seen in my clinic, similar or even better results have been obtained using 6-7 acupuncture treatments spread throughout the IVF protocol. The first treatment usually is given before egg retrieval and the last after embryo transfer. Acupuncture is done with extremely thin sterilized disposable needles which are inserted superficially at specific points on the abdomen, arms and legs. The needles are usually left in for 20-30 minutes. There is usually little or no discomfort and most people feel that the treatment is very relaxing and grounding.

How exactly does acupuncture help the body create eggs and hold embryos in the womb? A number of recent studies are helping us come to understand the physical effects of acupuncture which aid the body in becoming more fertile. One study, for example, looked at how acupuncture affects uterine blood flow. Uterine blood flow is very important in the creation and maintenance of the endometrium in the uterus and therefore in the likelihood for embryo implantation. Ten infertile women had their uterine blood flow measured, then were given 8 acupuncture sessions over 4 weeks. The study found that not only did acupuncture increase blood flow in the uterus during acupuncture, but that even when tested 14 days after the end of the treatments, blood flow remained increased.

A number of other studies have shown that acupuncture can help stimulate ovulation, even in women with conditions such as polycystic ovarian syndrome. Studies have shown

### Acupuncture and Fertility Research

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that acupuncture increases the body's production of beta endorphins which in turn affect the production of the lutenizing and follicle stimulating hormones (LH and FSH). These hormones are extremely important in female reproduction. There has also been research done showing that acupuncture has effects on the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis which is one of the most important hormonal systems involved in female reproduction

So what does this all mean? When all this research is viewed together it shows that while we don't yet understand all of the mechanisms involved in acupuncture's effect on fertility, it is clear that acupuncture can help improve fertility in many ways. By increasing blood flow to the uterus, affecting the production of LH, FSH and beta endorphins as well as modulating the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis, acupuncture has a direct impact on female fertility. In an article which reviewed all current data on acupuncture and fertility by Doctors Cheng, Chung and Rosenwaks of Weill Medical College of Cornell University, it was stated, "There is sufficient evidence to acupuncture's value to expand its use into conventional medicine and treatment of female infertility".

Another important aspect of Traditional Chinese Medicine is the use of herbs. While most women undergoing IVF treatment do not take herbs during the IVF cycle there are many ways which herbs can help either before or in between cycles. It is also highly effective for women who are not using any assisted reproductive techniques. In the next article I will discuss how Chinese herbs can help promote fertility as well as a little bit of the theory that lies behind the 2000 year history of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

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