

Acupuncture and infertility

Fertility | More and more couples are trying this ancient practice to help them get pregnant

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It's been used in China for over 2,000 years but acupuncture to help infertility is a new concept in North America.

Dr. Lorne Brown is a doctor of Chinese medicine specializing in fertility. This former Fredericton resident is now living in Vancouver.

Daily, he says, he receives e-mails from around the world from couples who have been unable to become pregnant who want more information on acupuncture as a treatment for infertility.

"We know it increases blood flow to the reproductive organs. The more blood flow to the ovaries the more nutrients and oxygen and balanced hormones. That means, hopefully, better egg quality and also the more blood to the (uterine) lining which means better implantation of the embryo."

Acupuncture has also been shown to reduce the effects of stress which has been proven to impair fertility. If stress and its negative hormones can be lowered and blood flow can be increased, he says, this can help people who want to have a baby.

He's been treating woman and men for fertility issues for the past four years. The majority of the people he sees have tried many times unsuccessfully to become pregnant. After years of failed attempts, many have all but given up on having a baby.

"A large percentage of our population have gone through the western system of drugs and in-vitro fertilization and have been told they have to use donor eggs or adoption," he says. "They come to us as a last hope. We don't get easy cases here."

While Dr. Brown says there is no guarantee someone who is treated with acupuncture for infertility will become pregnant, this is a treatment which can enhance a person's chances of having a baby.

If the body is in balance, he says, there is a better chance of conceiving naturally or improving the chance of becoming pregnant through in-vitro fertilization.

To put the body in balance, a healthy diet and lifestyle are key, he says.

Many factors play a role in achieving pregnancy and carrying a pregnancy to full-term and delivering a healthy baby.

These things include a healthy diet, exercise, acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine and relaxation techniques, Dr. Brown says. Over a couple of months, most people who undergo infertility acupuncture treatments, he says, notice an overall improvement in their well-being.

These treatments help eliminate PMS, menstrual cycle-associated pain, insomnia and anxiety, which are not considered normal or healthy in Chinese medicine.

"Our focus isn't the baby. Our focus is on improving their overall health," he says.

If pregnancy results, he says, this is a bonus. The theory is if the body is out of balance there is less chance a woman will become pregnant or that the pregnancy will develop.

Dr. Brown treats both female and male reproductive health issues. Sperm are extremely sensitive to the toxins in the environment, explains Dr. Brown.

"We've seen dramatic changes with men just by them taking certain supplements and diets alone. There's so much men can do we don't even need to see them.

WORLDWIDE INTEREST IN HIS SPECIALTY



(SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Dr. Lorne Brown does acupuncture as a treatment for infertility at his Vancouver-based clinic. Brown, a doctor of Chinese medicine specializing in fertility, is a former Fredericton resident who routinely gets inquiries from around the world about acupuncture and fertility.

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"It takes two to make a baby. The woman and man both have to be in good health."

Just as important as what's happening at the time of conception is the health of the couple three months leading up to the time of conception, he says. The quality of the egg and sperm are determined several months before conception. A healthy diet, exercise and lifestyle are key leading up to the time of conception.

Often, he says, these issues are addressed even before acupuncture and Chinese herbs are used to help with infertility issues.

Some couples use acupuncture and Chinese herbs alone in an effort to conceive. Others do this in conjunction with IVF treatments.

"Many people who are told they have to do IVF come to us to help them prepare for the IVF. They want to be physically and emotionally in balance to hedge their bets when they do the expensive procedure of IVF. Many conceive naturally while they are working to prepare for the IVF treatments."

Acupuncture and Chinese herbs, as a fertility treatment, cost about \$1,500 over three months. Acupuncture alone, he says, would typically cost about \$1,000. The use of IVF can cost about \$10,000.

While it is widely accepted by health practitioners as a fertility treatment in British Columbia, it is just starting to be recognized by doctors on the east coast, he says.

The reproductive clinic in Moncton often encourages couples to try acupuncture to help balance their bodies before starting fertility treatments such as fertility drug therapy and IVF.

Krista and Jeff Hamilton say they believe acupuncture, drug therapy and in-vitro fertilization all worked in conjunction to help them to have their six-month-old baby Rachel.

This couple decided they wanted to give acupuncture a try after she'd read a little bit about it while they were going through the process of IVF.

Hamilton says she contacted Dr. Lorne Brown to see if he knew of anyone in this city who specialized in infertility acupuncture.

"He said any naturopathic doctor (acupuncturist or doctor of Chinese medicine) could do this work if they had the right information. He sent us the protocols for doing the fertility acupuncture and we got in touch with a local naturopath that we knew."

Even though they were already involved with IVF treatments, she says, they decided acupuncture could help increase their chances of having a baby.

She went for acupuncture several times a week for three weeks prior to having IVF done.

"The fertility clinic in Moncton, when I told them what I was doing, said absolutely. They also recommend that as a protocol for some patients."

Hamilton says she is sure the acupuncture treatments were a contributing factor to their success in having baby Rachel.

Dr. Brown says he's happy to provide people information they can give to local practitioners who may not be familiar with specific fertility treatments when it comes to acupuncture and Chinese herbs.

"There are only a few places in the U.S. and Canada, like ours, that deal with reproductive health. Chinese medicine and acupuncture is great when it's practised by a qualified professional."

He cautions people who are considering this treatment to find a practitioner who is qualified and experienced in fertility treatments.

"I always say, nourish the soil before you plant the seed. Get balanced mentally and physically. Don't rush into anything," says Dr. Brown.

"Do your research. Find someone you want to work with and move forward."

A TRUE SUCCESS STORY



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Above, Krista Hamilton with her six-month-old daughter, Rachel Hamilton. Krista and Jeff Hamilton used acupuncture as part of their fertility treatments to boost their chances of having a baby.

Acupuncture has been used as a means of treating infertility for thousands of years

- The first recorded documentation of Traditional Chinese Medicine used to treat infertility dates back to 11 AD.
- Women are treated for at least three months of menstrual cycles regulating her hormones in order to improve the quality of the eggs as well as the lining of the uterus.
- Acupuncture needles are placed in energy points linked to the reproductive organs to improve energy flow to those areas.
- Herbs are specially compounded to specifically treat an underlying deficiency or disorder that may be contributing to fertility problems.
- Acupuncture and herbs can be used on their own to optimize fertility or in conjunction with Western-assisted reproductive technology to support in-vitro fertilization.
- Good candidates for TCM and acupuncture for infertility problems are men and women who have unexplained infertility or who have a functional reason for infertility such as a hormonal imbalance.
- Structural or anatomical causes of infertility such as blocked fallopian tubes respond best to Western medicine.
- TCM treatment is less expensive than A.R.T. and is non-invasive. It lacks the potential unwanted side effects of drug treatments and similar treatments.
- Research conducted by leading North American medical centres support the idea that acupuncture has potential fertility-boosting benefits.
- Studies indicate acupuncture as a fertility treatment have numerous health benefits including:
 - Stress reduction.
 - Correcting hormone imbalances
 - Improving blood flow to reproductive organs
 - Enhances the quality of the eggs
 - Increase uterine receptivity to fertilized eggs.
 - Increased blood flow to the uterus increasing uterine wall thickness which enhances implantation
 - Acupuncture stimulates the release of endorphins which effect the release of hormones that regulate ovulations and fertility.
 - Stress hormones have a detrimental effect on the normal ovulatory menstrual cycle.
 - Acupuncture releases beta-endorphins and has a calming effect on the nervous system.
 - Improved blood levels for fertility hormones has been shown to improve the quality and stimulate the release of eggs.
 - Normalization of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis; this is a key process in fertility.
- Acupuncture has been shown to have a positive effect on women with polycystic ovarian syndrome: This is a hormonal imbalance often resulting in infertility and present in three per cent of teens and adults.
- Studies have also shown Chinese herbs are also beneficial in preventing recurrent miscarriage.