

Treating infertility with needles

Acupuncture is a popular complementary therapy for women undergoing assisted reproductive treatment to help them get pregnant.

THE World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that as much as 10% of women suffer from infertility.

More and more couples are turning to assisted reproductive treatments (ART) such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and intrauterine insemination, to have children.

Many even go one step further by undergoing acupuncture and other traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatments to increase their chances of having a successful pregnancy.

In Western or modern medicine, infertility is defined as the inability to conceive despite having unprotected sexual intercourse for a year or longer.

It may be caused by lifestyle, environmental changes, stress levels and genetic conditions, among others.

In TCM however, infertility is considered to also possibly be the result of weak or disrupted qi (energy).

IMU Healthcare TCM gynaecology specialist Dr Hea Ai Sim says that in TCM, infertility in both men and women is due to insufficiency of Kidney* qi and Liver* qi stagnation, which causes both blood and qi disorders in the body.

"Women who face difficulties in conceiving naturally may be experiencing insufficiency in the *Chong-Ren* (Penetration-Conception) meridians and deficiency of the 'cold' Kidney* qi.

"Additionally, the general pathogenesis (development) of infertility includes phlegm dampness obstruction and blood stasis as a result of a 'cold' interior and deficiency in blood and qi," she says.

Improving chances of conception

Acupuncture is a 2,000-year-old practice that originated from China and is one of the many forms of TCM.

Over the years, it has gained popularity as a complementary therapy to ART for the management of infertility.

Studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of acupuncture in improving fertility and increasing ART success rates.

A 2002 study published in the *Fertility and Sterility* journal saw 160 patients undergoing ART divided into two test groups that both underwent embryo transfer: one with acupuncture and the control group without acupuncture.

The first group of patients underwent acupuncture sessions 25 minutes before and after embryo transfer.

This group had a 42.5% clinical pregnancy success rate, while the control group had a 26.3% success rate.

According to IMU Healthcare Chinese Medicine Centre clinician-in-charge Sin Yen Suan, acupuncture helps by improving uterine artery blood flow, decreasing uterine contractions, and supporting endometrial lining and implantation – all of which can help increase the likelihood of conception.

"In Chinese medicine, we believe that there are 361 classical acupoints that are connected to 14 major pathways called meridians, which are related to various vital organs and bodily functions.

"Acupuncture involves inserting sterile, disposable, hair-thin needles into various meridian points to help correct the qi flow," she says.

"It can stimulate the brain to regulate the body's neuroendocrine system and help the flow of hormones stimulating the adrenal glands, ovaries, and other organs and systems related to reproduction.

"Women who have irregular menstrual cycles benefit from acupuncture because it helps restore balance to the qi, promotes blood flow to the pelvic area and regulates menstrual cycles," she adds.

Ideally, a woman should have a menstrual cycle of 28-35 days for good eggs, but Sin says that some women have a shorter cycle of 21 days, while others have a longer cycle of 60 days.

She explains that the first step in



Acupuncture, as seen in this filepic, helps to improve blood flow to the uterus, decrease uterine contractions, and support endometrial lining and implantation, as well as decrease stress, which increases the chances of conception.

TCM would be to check if the infertility is caused by disrupted qi flow due to poor lifestyle, pre-existing conditions, diseases or other factors.

Her colleague and fellow TCM practitioner Dr Chep Lee Lu Siang says that she has seen many of her patients successfully conceive after combining acupuncture with their fertility treatments throughout her years of practice.

"There is also a documented case where a patient conceived within a month after undergoing Chinese medicine and fertility treatments.

"However, everyone reacts differently to the same treatment.

"Some may take up to a year to conceive, especially if the woman is over 40," she says.

Dr Lee notes that many people still do not realise that stress can significantly affect a person's ability to conceive.

"It was only as recent as a few decades ago that medical experts acknowledged how detrimental stress is to a woman's fertility," she says.

Many women are stuck in a perpetual cycle of stress due to their inability to conceive, especially after repeated tries.

This stress further decreases

their chances of successfully conceiving.

"According to a study by the Boston University School of Public Health, higher levels of stress are associated with lower odds of conception for women.

"Stress and anxiety can hinder pregnancy as cortisol – the body's main stress hormone – may affect ovulation.

"Acupuncture can help reduce stress by utilising the body's natural antidepressants.

"It does this by encouraging the body to release endorphins that lower stress levels," she adds.

Do your research

IMU Healthcare TCM gynaecology specialist Dr Cheah Chin Chin cautions that while acupuncture is a safe, affordable and non-invasive complementary treatment that couples can consider trying in combination with fertility treatments, they should be diligent in doing their research.

"It is always important to do your research before diving head-first into acupuncture," she says.

"Check with several complementary and alternative practitioner bodies such as the Federation of

Chinese Physicians & Acupuncturists Association of Malaysia or the Health Ministry's Traditional and Complementary Medicine Division to ensure that the acupuncturist is licensed and experienced.

"Read up on the topic to see if it is suitable for you and your partner.

"Sometimes, we may also prescribe other TCM treatments such as moxibustion or herbal medicine, if the patient is not on any fertility drugs, particularly in those who have a deficiency in the blood or Kidney* deficiency."

She encourages patients and couples to ask their acupuncturist or TCM practitioner questions about the treatments and processes involved.

"Feel free to ask them how many sessions of acupuncture are required, the duration of these sessions, and the next step once you have successfully conceived, as your acupuncturist or TCM practitioner may have follow-up treatments to strengthen your body."

She says that as a practitioner, transparency and constant communication are important for success.

"Generally, I would ask my patients about their medical histories, lifestyle, nutrition and more prior to treatment to see if we can pinpoint the cause of infertility.

"I also explain the treatments in detail to help patients understand the procedures and to let them decide whether they are comfortable to proceed.

"For patients who are undergoing fertility treatments, I usually prescribe several acupuncture sessions.

"Treatment is highly personalised and varies from patient to patient and we always work together with our patients' doctors and gynaecologists to ensure the best outcome."

"The terms Kidney and Liver here refer to the TCM concepts of those organs, and not the anatomical organs."

This article is courtesy of IMU Healthcare.