



COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES AND IVF

Complementary Medicine (CM) is diverse and provides a supportive, personal and holistic approach. The different therapies include acupuncture, massage therapy, aromatherapy, yoga, meditation, hypnosis and herbal medicine. Each offers a different method of help and can be used in conjunction to conventional and evidence-based treatments, providing many benefits as part of an integrated health plan. Couples who combine their IVF treatment with CM frequently report they feel calmer, emotionally stronger, and more able to cope with the demands of the IVF regimen, and importantly, feel more hopeful about the outcome.

ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture is a branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that dates back thousands of years. Fine needles are inserted into specific points on the body to facilitate a therapeutic effect. Acupuncture is underpinned by the notion of an energy flow called 'Qi' which circulates continuously throughout the body via channels or meridians. According to Chinese Medicine disease arises due to either an imbalance of the channels or from internal factors, which cause a disruption to the Qi flow. Acupuncture seeks to re-establish the flow by balancing the channels and bodily systems and promoting health and well-being (homeostasis). It has been used for centuries to regulate the female reproductive system. There is mounting evidence that suggests acupuncture provides a positive benefit for a variety of disorders, and may increase the efficacy of some conventional treatments, including IVF.

The evidence suggests acupuncture prepares the uterine lining, improves hormone levels, reduces the stress and anxiety associated with IVF, and may increase pregnancy rates. There are over ten studies that support the use of acupuncture with IVF to 'improve rates of pregnancy and live birth among women undergoing in-vitro fertilisation'. This is in contrast to only one study claiming acupuncture had little effect.

In the scientific literature, two separate 2008 meta-analyses of reliable studies to date suggest combining acupuncture with IVF is beneficial. In all studies the IVF patients received acupuncture before and after embryo transfer for 25-30 minutes each session. All studies used the same points.

One of the meta-analyses published in the British Medical Journal combined the results of seven previous studies and involved a total of 1366 women. It found that acupuncture increased the odds of falling pregnant by 65%. The benefits of receiving acupuncture include better implantation rates as well as increased rates of clinical pregnancy and live births. There are three potential reasons for these improved outcomes. Firstly, acupuncture influences the menstrual cycle, ovulation and fertility by indirectly stimulating the secretion of gonadotrophin-releasing hormone. Secondly, acupuncture may increase the blood flow to the uterus, which in turn increases the thickness of the endometrial lining, aiding implantation. Thirdly, acupuncture may inhibit the stress response by regulating blood levels of adrenal hormones in those undergoing IVF. This latter positive effect of acupuncture was also noted in another IVF/acupuncture study that concluded the women in the study were more relaxed and optimistic.

Anecdotal evidence suggests further encouraging effects of acupuncture on IVF is the reduction of the side effects of the fertility drugs. Acupuncturists treating IVF patients report a

decrease in bloating and abdominal pain, better sleep and less emotional fragility.

Male factor sperm problems are implicated in almost 40% of infertile couples. Several studies suggest that acupuncture can benefit men who have low sperm readings. For example, a 2005 study published in Fertility and Sterility concluded that acupuncture provides a general improvement in sperm quality.

There are usually no side effects associated with acupuncture and there is little discomfort from the procedure itself.

In conclusion, both meta-analyses indicated combining IVF with acupuncture, before and after embryo transfer, may increase the chance of achieving a pregnancy.

If you are interested in having acupuncture performed as part of your IVF treatment then contact the Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA) for a list of qualified practitioner names in your local area.

Freecall: 1300 725 334 (AACMA National Practitioner Referral)

Website: www.acupuncture.org.au

AROMATHERAPY & MASSAGE THERAPY

Essential oils have been used for thousands of years to help promote health and well-being. Specific essential oils in aromatherapy may help in the following ways; induce relaxation, calm the mind, counteract stress, ease tension and frustration. Selected essential oils used in conjunction with massage therapy may help in a number of ways: improve blood circulation to the muscles and tissues, detoxify the body by clearing away toxins, calm the body, relax the mind, relieve stress and contribute to a greater sense of well-being. Couples may find that using essential oils at home and regular aromatherapy massages may help to provide physical and emotional support when planning for a baby. Always consult a qualified therapist for advice and guidance before using essential oils. Some essential oils may not be safe to use while trying to conceive and during pregnancy.

HERBAL THERAPIES

Many herbal remedies are considered beneficial to overall well-being and can be safely taken prior to your treatment or in-between treatments. However at City Fertility Centre we do advise you stop herbal remedies when you commence medications during treatment. Many herbal remedies will effect a hormonal action which may interfere or counteract the action of your fertility medications. Herbs should be used with the same caution you would use with any other drug. If you or your partner is taking herbal supplements, please advise your Clinician.

If you are interested in undertaking herbal therapies as an integrated health plan prior to or in between IVF treatment, then contact the National Herbalists Association of Australia (NHAA) for a list of qualified practitioner names within your local area.

Phone: (02) 8765 0071 (NHAA National Practitioner Referral)

Website: www.nhaa.org.au

MEDITATION & HYPNOSIS

Hypnosis, meditation and relaxation exercise can serve as empowering processes which can be used while undertaking fertility treatment. The relationship between stress and infertility is complex. There is minimal evidence that anxiety contributes significantly to infertility, but increasing evidence that depression may. Several studies have shown that infertile women who learn a variety of stress-reducing techniques, including relaxation techniques, have higher pregnancy rates than women who do not learn such techniques. Physiologically, hypnosis, meditation and/or relaxation exercises are known to decrease blood pressure, to lower heart rate, and to decrease the production of stress hormones. The connection between stress and decreased fertility is thought to be directly related to our biological evolution. The mind-body knows that in situations of extreme

tension our sex organs are our most expendable parts. The mind-body knows that when times are tough, it is not the time to make a baby.

Meditation also stimulates the pineal gland. This gland produces several hormones, two of which are serotonin (necessary for libido and well-being) and melatonin (another hormone connected with feelings of relaxation and well-being), which in turn stimulate the pituitary gland. The pituitary is the gland which predominantly regulates female reproductive hormones such as FSH (follicle stimulating hormone which matures the eggs in the ovaries), estrogen, progesterone, and oxytocin in labor. It is possible for hypnosis, meditation and relaxation techniques to enhance and/or change the level of certain hormones within your body.

If you are interested in seeking a qualified hypnotherapist within your local area contact the Australian Hypnotherapists Association (AHA).

Freecall: 1800 067 557

Website: www.ahahypnotherapy.org.au

YOGA

Can yoga really impact on fertility? A researcher at Harvard Medical School conducted a study that took infertile women (those who had been trying to get pregnant for at least a year) and placed some of them onto a 10-week mind/body program that included yoga, meditation, nutrition, exercise and help to change negative thought patterns. 55% of participants conceived within the first 12 months, compared to 20% of women in a control group

Yoga is thought to improve the general reproductive health of women trying to conceive by increasing the blood flow to the pelvis, toning and strengthening the muscles that support reproductive organs, improving spinal alignment, enabling

better circulation and improving the capacity and quality of respiration. It can also be said that the most powerful effect of regular yoga practice on a person's fertility is through the calming, restorative effects on the mind and body.

One of the most pervasive mind/body fertility challenges for couples undertaking fertility treatment includes stress and "feeling out of control". Stress hormones generate chemicals in the body that weaken immunity and suppress fertility hormones which may impair conception. Yoga, because of its use of relaxation and breathing techniques provides an antidote to the negative emotional and physical impacts of stress, anger and depression resulting from infertility or fertility treatments.

Although there is very little direct evidence to suggest practicing Yoga will guarantee pregnancy, the known benefits of inducing relaxation and reducing emotional and physical stresses can be a useful adjunct when undertaking fertility treatments.



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