

[IMAGE]

Dreaming of Baby

By Bill Reddy

Pregnancy is the result of a complex chain of events that doesn't occur easily for some couples. The causes of infertility are varied and standard medical treatments can be costly and invasive, but there are alternative treatment options that may make the dream of a family a reality.

Infertility affects one in six couples in the United States. According to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, that corresponds to 6.1 million women and their partners in the U.S. or 10 percent of the reproductive population. This figure continues to rise due to higher levels of toxicity in our environment, electromagnetic exposure, greater obesity in younger people and consumption of processed foods (leading to serious vitamin and mineral deficiencies). The American Fertility Society states that one-third of infertility cases can be traced to the woman, one-third to the man, and the remaining third to either a combination of the two partners or to no identifiable cause.

Men are fairly simple reproductively: Issues include reduced sperm count, problems with sperm motility (movement) or morphology (development to full maturity), or a combination of these that can be measured accurately in a semen analysis. Something as simple as a vitamin deficiency can lead to male sterility. A selenium deficiency will reduce sperm production, vitamin C will limit motility, vitamin E will disturb hormone production and zinc will impair function of the testes.

In by James and Phyllis Balch, they recommend the following supplementation for both partners:

- Selenium: 200-400 mcg/day
- Vitamin C: 2,000-6,000 mg/day in divided doses
- Vitamin E: 200 IU/day
- Zinc: 80 mg/day (zinc gluconate absorbs the best)
- L-Arginine (specifically for men): to increase sperm count/motility. Take as directed on package or after talking to your health care provider

A married couple react happily to the news of a home pregnancy test. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register

Mark Both herbal medicine and acupuncture have been used for more than 30 centuries to improve male and female reproductive health. A 2002 study performed at Tongji Hospital in China involved 22 patients with idiopathic (unknown cause) male infertility. They were treated with acupuncture two times a week for eight weeks. Researchers evaluated sperm concentration, motility, morphology, fertilization rates and embryo quality. Sperm motility and ratio improved significantly after eight weeks of treatment and fertilization rates were higher (66.2 percent) after acupuncture than before treatment (40.2 percent), representing an increase of 65 percent.

In a more recent study (2006) performed at Jinan university in Guanzhou, China, 85 men with abnormal sperm were treated with acupuncture. The total rate of pregnancy of their wives was 78.8 percent after treatment. The study conclusion was, "Acupuncture can significantly improve and regulate endocrine function, increase quality of semen and elevate pregnancy rates of wives of men with abnormal sperm."

Women, by comparison, are extremely complex reproductively. They have countless hormones that have to be in fairly narrow concentrations to get pregnant, stay pregnant and carry a baby to term. Some common causes of infertility can be categorized as environmental (e.g., heavy metal toxicity, electromagnetic influences), emotional, structural (Fallopian tube occlusion [blockage]), and organic (anti-sperm antibody production, sexually transmitted diseases, endometriosis, polycystic Ovarian syndrome, etc.) Interestingly enough, no emotional causes are cited in modern medical texts beyond "stress" - a woman's concern over having a baby will actually inhibit her from having one.

Pregnancy is a multi-step process. First, a woman must be capable of producing a viable egg (ovum). Then, the egg must be able to be fertilized by the sperm, travel down the fallopian tube and successfully implant into the wall of the uterus (endometrium). At this point, the fetus must be nurtured in that environment until birth. Trying to get pregnant is an emotionally charged topic, with well-meaning family members adding to the already high pressure to reproduce. Anxiety, anger, disappointment with one's reproductive system and shame are all emotions common with partners trying to conceive. Those couples who have tried conscientiously for years to have children and finally adopt, have a surprisingly high rate of pregnancy after the adoption paperwork is complete and the pressure is off.

Tai chi and meditation are two exceptional ways for a couple to decompress and return to a state of balance in a world of high-powered careers and chronically overscheduled lives. Practitioners of Chinese medicine

do not use the term "infertility", we recognize an imbalance is present and need to work with the patient to restore balance and harmony resulting in healthy parents and subsequently healthy offspring. Focusing on optimal health is the key to conception, according to Chinese doctors.

A baby trying to crawl. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has identified four common disorders (in order of prevalence) that contribute to infertility or increased chance of miscarriage: polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, fibroids, and premature ovarian failure (POF) or ovarian insufficiency.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS):PCOS is a disorder affecting 5 percent and 10 percent of American women, where the ovaries are enlarged and contain fluid-filled sacs. Levels of androgens (male hormones) typically increase causing a number of issues. Acne and hirsutism (additional hair or coarse hair) are common signs of PCOS. The symptoms usually develop during puberty and can include irregular menstrual bleeding or weight gain. Acupuncture is known to help balance hormones and improve the symptoms associated with PCOS.

Endometriosis: Endometriosis is a disease whereby patches of endometrial tissue, normally found in the uterus, migrate to other areas of the body, usually within the pelvis. The implication is that the misplaced endometrial tissue responds to the same hormones as the endometrium and may bleed during the menstrual period, leading to cramps, pain, irritation and scar tissue. Researchers estimate that 5.5 million women suffer from endometriosis in North America.

Signs and symptoms of endometriosis include painful menstruation (cramps, abdominal pain, etc.). Diagnosing endometriosis on symptoms alone can be daunting due to their variability and overlap with other conditions such as pelvic inflammatory disease and irritable bowel syndrome.

In February 2008, the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* published a study investigating the clinical effectiveness of acupuncture on primary dysmenorrhea (painful periods). More than 200 women participated in the trial, which determined that 15 weeks of acupuncture treatment correlated with significantly lower pain intensity (1-10 scale) than those who received conventional medical care. The study authors concluded, "Acupuncture in patients with dysmenorrhea was associated with improvements in pain and quality of life as compared to treatment with usual care alone and was cost-effective within usual thresholds." The beauty of acupuncture in this scenario is that it has very few negative side effects (occasional bruising at the needling site and reports of dizziness) compared to the variety of drugs used to

treat the condition.

Fibroids: Uterine fibroids or "myomas" are non-cancerous growths composed of muscle and fibrous tissue that occur on, inside or outside the uterus wall. At least 20 percent of women over the age of 35 have fibroids ranging in size from microscopic to as large as a cantaloupe, and their cause is unknown. More than 200,000 hysterectomies are performed each year because of fibroid tumors.

Fibroids are unusual in that even large fibroids may produce no symptoms. It depends on their location, size, number and activity. Symptoms include heavy or prolonged menstrual bleeding, spotting in between periods, pain, pressure or heaviness. Some women also will have to urinate frequently. Large fibroids can sometimes be felt in the lower abdomen.

A December 2004 article in the *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine* evaluated the use of an herbal formula in pill form on 120 women with uterine fibroids. Use of the formula resulted in a reduction in size of the fibroids along with improvement of symptoms such as irregular menstruation, spotting between periods and abdominal pain, with a total effective rate of 95.8 percent. The herbs showed no toxicity in analysis and were considered safe.

If fibroids are 2 cm or smaller, acupuncture can be a viable solution; if they are larger than 2 cm, herbal medicine may be more appropriate.

Premature Ovarian Failure (POF): POF is a condition where the number of eggs in a woman's body has been reduced significantly or the follicles are not responding to hormonal stimulation. This problem affects one in every 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 29 and one in every 100 between the ages of 29 and 39. In such cases, there is a marked reduction in estrogen production, the follicles don't produce mature eggs, and the endometrium is too thin for proper implantation.

Signs and symptoms of POF include shorter cycles (usually with no ovulation) or inconsistent periods (skipping a month here and there). Menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness may manifest as well.

What's the lesson here? According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, more than 106,000 Americans die per year due to the *proper* use of prescription medications, which emphasizes the value of natural, drug-free therapies. With regard to infertility, studies in the U.S. and abroad are showing promising results for the use of acupuncture and Oriental medicine in dealing with reproductive health matters. It's

being shown to be safe, effective and non-invasive compared to standard medical approaches. Ask your doctor for more information.

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