

## **Healthy Pregnancies, Happy Babies: Promoting Natural Fertility with Nutrition, Natural Medicine, and Acupuncture**

**By Dr. Suzanne Tang, N.D., L.Ac. and Tina Yang, L.Ac., M.S.**

Whether you are just starting to have a family or you have been trying for a few years, Chinese medicine and Naturopathic medicine can help promote fertility and provide you and your family with a healthy pregnancy and a happy baby. Coastal Acupuncture & Natural Health Center specializes in treating women's health conditions, such as infertility, polycystic ovarian syndrome, dysmenorrhea, menstrual irregularities, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and menopause. Although we address a variety of women's health issues, we have extensive experience treating infertility.

Infertility is defined as the failure to become pregnant after a year of unprotected intercourse. Infertility affects 11.8% of the US population or over 7.3 million women and their partners.<sup>1</sup> For many couples infertility can be an emotional and frustrating rollercoaster ride. We help ease these fears and anxiety by educating our patients on the risk factors and causes of infertility. We empower them with natural preconception health care treatment recommendations to optimize their fertility.

There are multiple causes of female infertility. With the excessive consumption of refined flours and sugar in our diet and increasingly inactive lifestyle, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) is the most common cause of female infertility. PCOS can affect hormone levels causing elevated androgen and insulin levels and low progesterone levels, leading to irregular menstrual cycles, weight gain, and acne. Other causes of infertility include endometriosis with scarring of the fallopian tubes, low ovarian reserve, luteal phase defect, and low thyroid function, and poor volume, quality, and/or motility of sperm in men.

In the case of endometriosis there can be scarring of the fallopian tubes from surgery or sexually transmitted diseases which can disrupt the journey the egg makes through the fallopian tubes and to the uterus to unite with sperm, interfering with conception. Hormonal imbalances associated with low ovarian reserve and luteal phase defect are also frequently seen in our practice. Often seen with increased age and long-term oral contraceptive use, low ovarian reserve is marked by low estrogen and progesterone levels, elevated follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) levels, and lack of ovulation. In women with luteal phase defect, progesterone is not made in sufficient levels to prepare the uterine lining for embryo implantation. This problem often leads to shortened menstrual cycles and recurrent miscarriages. With low thyroid function or hypothyroidism, women may have cold hands and feet, difficulty with weight loss, dry skin and hair, severe fatigue, constipation, iron deficiency and high cholesterol. Once diagnosed through a comprehensive thyroid panel, hypothyroidism can be treated with natural thyroid supplementation.

For many, environmental toxins, polluted and processed foods, and increasing stress factors can hinder the fertility of couples trying to conceive. Heavy metal and chemical toxicity are other risk factors that are linked to causing male and female infertility, miscarriages, and congenital defects. Elevated levels of heavy metals in sperm can cause anti-sperm antibodies in their partner. Found in cigarette smoke, paint, dental amalgams, large fish, cookware, antiperspirants, antacids, and medications, heavy metals are ubiquitous in our environment. A simple urine collection test can help identify whether you may have heavy metal toxicities. On a daily basis we are exposed to numerous chemicals that disrupt the endocrine system and negatively effect male and female fertility, fetal health and sexual development. These chemicals include hormones and pesticides found in our food, phthalates high in plastics, perfumes, nail polish, and adhesives, organophosphate compounds used as flame retardants on clothing, bedding, electronic equipment and furniture, and bisphenol A used in food coating, plastics, and dental treatments.

During the first fertility visit with our patients, we do a thorough screening to assess risk factors

that may contribute to causes of the patient's infertility and order or review laboratory work to identify any contributing causes of infertility. Risk factors such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and high stress levels can significantly interfere with fertility. Patients are counseled on eating a nutrient-rich, fresh, whole foods diet, engaging in a physically active lifestyle, and reducing their stress with a variety of relaxation techniques to promote fertility.

A study published by the Harvard School of Public Health found that multiple lifestyle factors including a whole foods, low-glycemic index diet high in monounsaturated fats, vegetables, and low fat dairy and low in trans-fatty acids with multivitamin supplementation, weight control, and physical activity were associated with a 69% lower risk of ovulatory disorder infertility.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, nutritional deficiencies associated with unhealthy lifestyle and diet have been linked to infertility. Antioxidants such as vitamin A and vitamin E are especially important because they inhibit cell damage to ovaries and sperm caused by oxidative stress. Smoking, older age, and higher body mass index (BMI) appear to be related to decreased vitamin A and E serum levels. Lower levels of these antioxidants were associated with low sperm count in men and anovulation in women.<sup>3</sup> In a recent systematic review, 14 of the 17 trials (82%) showed that antioxidant therapy, which included vitamins C and E, zinc, selenium, folate, carnitine, and carotenoids improved either sperm quality or pregnancy rate.<sup>4</sup> These nutrient levels in addition to others can be measured through laboratory blood work.

Four months prior to conception, we recommend customized detoxification programs to our patients that include healthy dietary and lifestyle changes and vitamin, mineral, and herbal supplementation to metabolize and eliminate heavy metal and chemical toxicities and optimize fertility. Elimination of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco is also strongly encouraged during preconception detoxification to minimize the negative effects these chemicals have on sperm and egg quality, conception, and fetal development. Recently, we treated a 36 year-old overweight male patient diagnosed with poor sperm quality and motility. Wanting to expand their family and provide a companion for their six year-old son, he and his wife tried to conceive for four years. A ten year history of smoking and frequent alcohol use had impaired his fertility. Extremely motivated and willing to improve his lifestyle habits, he committed to a three week detoxification program that included elimination of tobacco, alcohol, caffeine and processed foods. He incorporated a well-balanced diet, exercise routine, and regular acupuncture treatments. Six weeks later, he was ten pounds lighter, smoke and alcohol free, and soon to be a dad once again. His beautiful baby girl was born in February of this year.

Naturopathic medicine combined with acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, which is steeped in over 5,000 years of history, have also been effective in treating many cases of female infertility due to problems such as PCOS, low ovarian function, luteal phase defect, and endometriosis. A study conducted in Sweden concluded that electroacupuncture improved the frequency of ovulation from 15% to 66% for up to three months after subjects received treatment. The subjects that had a positive response to the electroacupuncture treatment had a significantly lower body mass index (BMI), waist-to-hip circumference ratio, and serum basal insulin level. This study suggested that in patients with PCOS, acupuncture could be considered as an alternative or adjunct to drug induced ovulation therapy.<sup>5</sup> Additionally a randomized, double blind placebo-controlled trial found that myo-inositol, a naturally occurring nutrient and folic acid significantly increased ovulation and decreased weight in patients with PCOS.<sup>6</sup> Acupuncture in combination with a low-glycemic index diet, exercise program, and vitamin-mineral supplementation can help regulate abnormal hormone levels and regulate menstrual cycles in patients with PCOS.

For patients with luteal phase issues, natural progesterone hormone therapy, herbal medicine, and acupuncture are effective ways to support progesterone levels, regulate menstrual cycles and improve the endometrial lining. A herbal supplement consisting of chasteberry, green tea, L-arginine, and folic

acid was found to normalize menstrual cycles and increase pregnancy rate. Twenty-six percent of the treatment group experienced pregnancies versus ten percent of the control group.<sup>7</sup> In addition, another study showed that a series of electro-acupuncture treatments increased the uterine artery blood flow which in turn increased the thickness of the endometrial lining in women diagnosed with infertility.<sup>8</sup> Endometrial thickness and uterine artery blood flow are important parameters for successful embryo implantation and pregnancy. In our clinic, we treated a 38 year-old female diagnosed with low ovarian reserve, elevated FSH levels, and luteal phase defect. Trying to conceive for over one year, the patient had a history of hypothyroidism and habitual miscarriage. Her treatment consisted of weekly acupuncture sessions, Chinese herbal medicine, fish oils, vitamin D, iron, prenatal vitamins, and probiotics. After four months of treatment the patient's FSH levels dropped within normal range and one month later, she happily announced a positive pregnancy test. She is currently eight months pregnant and is eagerly awaiting the arrival of her baby boy.

Acupuncture has also helped many couples increase their chance of conceiving during in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments. A recent study was conducted on 160 patients undergoing IVF. This study showed a clinical pregnancy rate of 42.5% in patients who received acupuncture treatment before and after embryo transfer versus a 26.3% clinical pregnancy rate in the group who did not receive acupuncture treatment during embryo transfer.<sup>9</sup> Like this study, our practice has shown that acupuncture can significantly improve pregnancy rate during assisted reproductive therapy. Patients treated with acupuncture during IVF have had a 66.7% successful pregnancy rate. One remarkable case was a 44 year-old female diagnosed with secondary infertility who had 11 failed rounds of artificial insemination within one year and six months. Acupuncture was received by this patient throughout her IVF cycle. Nine months later at 45 years of age she birthed her second son.

At Coastal Acupuncture and Natural Health Center we offer integrative care that blends the best of western and eastern medicine. Truly passionate about helping our patients create new life, we provide compassionate, comprehensive, and individualized healthcare. For more information about our services, please call (949) 646-4325 or visit our website, [www.coastalacupuncturectr.com](http://www.coastalacupuncturectr.com).

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<sup>1</sup> National Survey of Family Growth, CDC 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Chavarro JE et al. *Obstet Gynecol.* 2007 Nov, 110(5):1050-8.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Azemi MK et al. *Reprod Biomed Online.* 2009 Oct, 19(4):583-90.

<sup>4</sup> Ross C et al. *Reprod Biomed Online.* 2010 June, 20(6): 711-23.

<sup>5</sup> Stener-Victorin E, Waldenström U, Tagnfors U. et al. *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand* 2000; 79: 180-8.

<sup>6</sup> Westphal LM, Polan ML, Trant AS. *Clin Exp Obstet Gynecol.* 2006, 33(4):205-8.

<sup>7</sup> Gerli S et al. *Eur Rev Med Pharmacol Sci.* 2007 Sept-Oct, 11(5):347-54.

<sup>8</sup> Stener-Victorin E, Waldenström U, Tagnfors U. et al. *Hum Reprod Biol* June 1996; 11:1314-7.

<sup>9</sup> Paulis WE et al. *Fert Steril* April 2002; 77:721-4.

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