

Needle work

Recent studies have indicated that acupuncture can increase rates of pregnancy in women with fertility issues and its exponents say it also helps with morning sickness and post-natal depression. **Bernice Mulligan** reports

IT'S hard to gauge just how much popular culture affects our lifestyle and health choices, but it certainly can't have hurt the reputation of acupuncture when the hugely popular TV series *Sex and the City* devoted almost an entire episode to it. Fans of the show may recall a desperate-to-become-pregnant Charlotte visiting acupuncture specialist Dr Mao and having her face covered in tiny acupuncture needles while trying to find her 'centre'. In the show, Charlotte does become pregnant only to lose the baby to miscarriage. However, in real life many acupuncture supporters claim that, for women trying to conceive, the ending can be much happier.

A study carried out in Germany in 2002 caused much excitement among advocates of acupuncture when its results were published in the medical journal *Fertility and Sterility*. The study, led by Dr Wolfgang Paulus at University of Ulm, tracked 160 women undergoing in-vitro fertilisation (IVF). Half of them received fertility treatment but no acupuncture while the other half were given acupuncture before and after IVF. The pregnancy rate in the group receiving acupuncture was 42.5pc compared to 26.3pc in the group that did not receive it.

Needless to say, the buzz around the efficacy of acupuncture grew, and these days numerous women, many of them tired or disillusioned with western medicine, are increasingly turning their attention to this ancient system for numerous ailments, not least pregnancy and fertility-related issues.

Karen Costin is an Irish practitioner of five-element acupuncture, which is a Japanese system that focuses on healing the body, mind and spirit. [Traditional acupuncture hails from China and is based on the concept of 'Qi' or vital energy, which flows around the body. Energy blockages are said to be released by the insertion of needles at certain points.]

On the link between fertility and acupuncture, she says: "The theory is that acupuncture can affect the autonomic nervous system, which is involved in the control of muscles and glands, and could therefore make the lining of the uterus more receptive to receiving an embryo.

"In addition, acupuncture can help with other aspects of pregnancy, including reducing the risk of miscarriage, easing morning sickness, rectifying a breech

presentation, reducing anxiety, inducing labour and easing pain."

Although there was a time when the western medical establishment was sceptical about anything dubbed 'alternative', this is changing in relation to acupuncture, she says. "I think we've come a long way and doctors have a lot more respect for other systems of medicine. These days, you're less likely to find a doctor who's negative about acupuncture. At the very least, he or she will say: 'Well, this can't do any harm!'"

Dr David Walsh, consultant gynaecologist with the Sims International Fertility Clinic in Dublin, says the mounting positive evidence in favour of acupuncture means it is actually moving out of the 'alternative' category and more towards mainstream medicine.

"Some 10 out of 11 studies into the link between acupuncture and fertility have found that acupuncture does have a positive effect. There is no evidence to suggest it is an unsafe treatment and I would definitely be someone who would persuade for rather than against it."

Walsh says that acupuncture's effect on a person's stress levels is reason alone for undertaking the treatment. "We know that stress and infertility are inter-linked and that treatments such as IVF can be hugely stressful, so something like acupuncture can help address this."

According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, women undergoing infertility treatment can face stress levels on a par with those of people coping with chronic illnesses such as heart disease or cancer.

OVERCOMING POST-NATAL DEPRESSION

As well as helping a woman cope with the invasive nature of IVF treatment, Costin adds that acupuncture

can also be useful for dealing with the stress she may feel following the birth of her child.

"There are women who have yearned for a baby for years and yet may feel disconnected from their newborn when he or she arrives. A lot of the patients I treat who suffer from post-natal depression are professionals who are used to being in control of their lives. The total loss of control in birth can be especially traumatic."

Costin says acupuncture can help relieve post-natal depression, which is believed to affect one in 10 women who've had a baby.



The acupuncture experience

Having needles stuck into your body may not sound like fun, but acupuncture is not a painful procedure, explains Karen Costin, a five-element acupuncturist who has been practising for 19 years.

"You will feel a slight sensation but it is nothing like the pain you associate with a syringe because the needles are so fine — about the width of a hair. They are disposable and made from stainless steel. Having said that, you do need to feel something because it means the treatment is working."

During the first consultation, Costin will have a long discussion with you about your overall health, diet and day-to-day activities and may only do a small amount of acupuncture.

"Five-element acupuncture is extremely holistic — I treat the whole person rather than just focusing on a symptom; acupuncture helps the body to heal itself."

For more information, go to www.karencostin.com or call 087 2623287.



Tara O'Sullivan and her husband tried to conceive naturally for eight years before finally undergoing in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), which resulted in the birth of twins, Jack and Molly — pictured above. Before becoming pregnant for the second time, Tara turned to acupuncture to help the process along

Early last year, I tried to have some frozen embryos [from a previous IVF cycle] implanted, but unfortunately, it didn't work. After that, I decided to get my system sorted as it was so run down, which is when I turned to acupuncture.

The fertility clinic I attend actually recommends acupuncture as an aid to getting pregnant. I'd also read about studies where IVF success rates can increase by more than 50pc when acupuncture is used alongside the treatment — normally, the success rate is about 26pc. I decided to go to an acupuncturist before I attempted to get pregnant for the second time. She spent a few sessions helping me normalise my cycle and a little later, I went for a fresh cycle of IVF. On the day of implantation, I visited her twice: once before the embryo was implanted; and then directly afterwards to raise the chances of the pregnancy succeeding. I'm now 19 weeks pregnant and I still see her on a regular basis.

Acupuncture helps in a variety of ways. First of all, IVF involves a huge amount of drugs, so I really think it helped me manage the side effects of the medication. As well as this, the quality of eggs I produced and the proportion fertilised was much higher this time round and I found my stress levels also decreased.

At the beginning, I had pretty bad morning sickness, and the acupuncture really helped with that. In general, I'm more chilled out and this will hopefully lead to a more chilled-out baby.

I would say to those who are thinking of having this treatment, make sure the acupuncturist you employ is properly trained in fertility issues. It's such a specialist area, you need to have someone who knows what he or she is doing. Fertility is one area where women can really be manipulated. There are lots of charlatans out there, so make sure you do your homework.

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