



WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Using Acupuncture to Improve the Success Rates of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

Aimee Raupp, LAc

Most of us are aware of the scientific research articles that were published in esteemed journals such as *Fertility and Sterility* and *BMJ* showing how patients receiving acupuncture before and after IVF transfer improved the success rates of IVF. Most of us talk to our fertility patients about these studies. Most of us employ this practice in our clinics—we see our patients right before and after IVF transfer and follow a similar point prescription to the one depicted in the research papers. And, when we are treating our fertility patients for months or longer and they are faced with the IVF, we are there to support them and guide them.

But, not all of the patients coming to see us for IVF support have been patients that we have been working with for months. A lot of the IVF patients we see in our clinics are coming in specifically for acupuncture support with IVF.

So, how should we approach those who come to us, often as new patients, a few weeks, some times a few days before their IVF transfer and want to do acupuncture because they are willing to do anything to increase their odds of getting pregnant? Of course, we treat them. Of course, we talk about the research that was published showing how acupuncture helped IVF outcome. But, for me, the question that comes up is: do most acupuncturists follow the exact point prescription depicted in the research papers or do they treat what they see? Do they take the entire case into account?



Over the years, I've seen many practitioners who follow the exact point prescription from the research papers. And, honestly, earlier on in my practice, I was more likely to strictly adhere the point prescription from the scientific research papers as well. However, as I have matured in my practice, I don't. Now, I treat what I see and adjust the protocol to fit the individual patient.

Most often these fertility patients are seeking our assistance because they want to do anything possible to improve their odds of getting pregnant. And, as practitioners, I think it is our responsibility to assist them. But, what we do is more than just follow a specified point prescription. We take the time to talk to the patient, to hear their story, to diagnose their case and to develop a treatment plan that best suits them. And, that goes way beyond sticking needles in specified points.

These patients—like all our patients—are seeking guidance. And, as practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine, we have a lot more to offer them than just scientific research. There is an essence and beauty to our medicine that transcends any science.

With any fertility patient—one that I've know for months, or one that I am meeting the day before her scheduled IVF—I take the opportunity to discuss the importance of "preparing their palace." When I say palace, you are all aware I mean their uterus. But we are not just talking about them avoiding cold foods (to avoid a cold uterus), we are talking about preparing their palace on a

spiritual level.

I'll often ask all my fertility patients emotionally charged questions such as:

"Do you want to be a mother?"

"What are your fears surrounding being a mother?"

"Have you made space in your life for a child?"

"Is your partner ready to be a parent?"

For the most part, what I find clinically is that there is often a great deal of emotional blockage surrounding motherhood. And, I use acupuncture points accordingly. Typically, I choose points on the heart and kidney meridians to allow their spirit to be unblocked and to move freely. I needle with the intention of calming their spirit, bringing them peace and courage and allowing their bodies to open up to having a child.

I also always encourage my fertility patients to visualize themselves pregnant. I think it is extremely important that the patient tune into their bodies and get a sense of what it will feel like and even look like to be pregnant. I'll have them talk to me about what emotions come up as they imagine themselves pregnant. And, based on their responses, I choose the acupuncture points I deem appropriate. When I am doing this, I am following what I was taught as a student: listen to the patient as they know what treatment they need.

I find, if I listen closely, patients always guide me on how to treat them.

As well, I strongly encourage the patient to have their partner come in for acupuncture. I feel this is often missing in the treatment plan. Seeing the partner is extremely important to align the energies of both partners prior to the IVF transfer. As what should normally occur in vivo is happening in vitro—sperm and egg should be meeting inside the women's body, not outside in a petri dish. And when that meeting happens—no matter where it is—the partners should be aligned in spirit. I feel that treating both partners helps with that alignment.

Sometimes this is not feasible. If that's the case, I have them do a little spiritual work prior to the transfer—focusing on each of them picturing themselves as parents, feeling the joy of parenthood, seeing them as a unit, seeing their family grow, feeling love and support and excitement and gratitude. I encourage the partners to talk through this process, to really hear one another and to work out any tension that arises in this conversation. I truly believe that the energy of the couple needs to be in sync for a healthy happy pregnancy.

Of course, when treating these patients, my point protocol is also focused on supporting the yin and on getting warmth to the uterus and on supporting the kidney energy. However, I feel that as practitioners, we need to take it to the spiritual level, especially with patients undergoing infertility treatments as they are often dealing with an overwhelming amount of emotion.

These patients not only need their *qi* to be unblocked but they need their spirit to move freely, they need to heal and release from the emotional roller coaster they have been on. When they come into our clinics, we not only need to give them acupuncture, but we are there to allow them the space to grieve and open their hearts to allow life to flourish inside of them.

DECEMBER 2012