

Pins and Needles Could Acupuncture Help Promote Pregnancy?

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Pairing an ancient Chinese medicine technique with in-vitro fertilization treatments can tip the odds in favor of women waiting to get pregnant, a new German medical study has found.

The study, published in the April edition of the medical journal *Fertility and Sterility*, found that acupuncture, an important element in the 4,000-year-old tradition of Chinese medicine, increases the chance of pregnancy for women undergoing in-vitro fertilization (IVF).

It does not identify how acupuncture may affect the uterus and reproductive system, but the researchers found the technique enhanced the chances of becoming pregnant for a significant number of the women in their small study population. Though the reason that acupuncture helps may be somewhat of a mystery, it is a serious study that deserves attention, ABCNEWS' Dr. Nancy Snyderman said.

"We know that acupuncture, when the needles are placed correctly, can affect the nervous system of the body," ABCNEWS Dr. Nancy Snyderman said. "So the question always is, can you make the uterus a better receiving place for embryos?"

Researchers included 160 patients undergoing in-vitro fertilization for the study. The patients, who were all required to have good quality embryos, were evenly and randomly divided into two groups similar in age and diagnosis.

When the patients were examined using ultrasound six weeks after their IVF procedures, the differences in pregnancy rates were notable. In the control group, 26 percent of the women, or 21 out of 80 patients, became pregnant. Of the patients who had received acupuncture treatments, 42 percent of the women, 34 out of 80, became pregnant.

Two Rounds of Acupuncture

Researchers utilized acupuncture on half of the patients in their study. According to the principles of traditional Chinese medicine, energy flows through the body along defined pathways, also called "meridians." Acupuncture is a means of influencing this energy to induce a particular effect in the body.

The group receiving acupuncture treatments had one treatment before the embryos were transferred to their uterus, and another treatment after the transfer. The researchers inserted sterile needles into the patients' bodies at specific points, including along the spleen and the stomach "meridians," in an effort to stimulate blood flow and direct energy to the uterus, and to produce a sedative effect.

"The idea being that if you can stimulate the nerves, you can make the uterus quiet and blood flow," Snyderman said. "It makes it easier for the embryos to take hold."

Researchers inserted additional needles into the patients' ears, both to influence the uterus and stabilize the endocrine system. Needles were left in place for 25 minutes while the patients rested. The control group also rested, lying still for 25 minutes after embryo transfer, as part of the IVF protocol.

The researchers plan to conduct further studies to try to rule out possible psychological or psychosomatic effects. Snyderman, said the study backs up what doctors have heard anecdotally for years: that by relaxing a woman can increase her chances of becoming pregnant. This may be the evidence to prove it that has been lacking, she said. "There is no doubt, because this was a very well done study and it was reported in a very highly regarded medical journal, that doctors will sit up and pay attention to it," she said. "This is the first time we may have had a serious marriage between an art and science that is so many, many years old, and what is really cutting-edge technology, in-vitro fertilization."

What Is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture originated in China more than 5,000 years ago. It is based on the belief that a person's health is determined by having a balanced flow of "qi" (also spelled chi), the vital life energy circulating through the body. When special needles are inserted into acupoints just under the skin, they help correct and rebalance this flow of energy, relieving pain and/or restoring health. It is used as a healing treatment for numerous conditions ranging from the common cold to addiction and chronic fatigue syndrome. It is also used as an adjunctive treatment for AIDS.

Generally, acupuncturists use somewhere between three and 15 needles for treatment. Costs vary, based on location and practitioners' training and experience.

In most states, non-physician acupuncturists are required by law to use disposable, one-time-use sterilized needles. Physicians can use reusable sterilized needles because of their backgrounds in infection control.