

Acupuncture for Gynaecology

Acupuncture background

Acupuncture has been used as a beneficial medical treatment in China for over two thousand years. During acupuncture, thin disposable needles are inserted into specific points in the body to restore balance and promote the normal flow of qi along meridians. These channels of energy have over three hundred acupuncture points located along them, each with specific functions to enhance the health of the body.

Acupuncture is not like an injection. Most people may feel some heaviness, numbness or warmth around the point, or a slight radiating along the meridian, followed by a feeling of relaxation.

Other treatments can involve moxibustion, in which penetrating heat from a burning Chinese herb is used to warm acupoints in order to tonify or to promote flow of qi; or cupping, the application of warmed glass cups to certain areas of the body to help pain or blockages and release toxins.

Acupuncture for gynaecology

In the area of gynaecology, acupuncture is effective for a wide range of problems, including period pain, irregular periods, amenorrhea, PMT, endometriosis, fibroids, and infertility. Acupuncture is also safe and effective during pregnancy, where it is used to relieve morning sickness, boost energy, reduce fluid retention, correct breech presentation and gently prepare the body for labour. Acupuncture helps to increase energy levels, improve sleep and enable the body to deal better with stress.

In Chinese medicine a dynamic balance between yin and yang and a smooth flow of qi is necessary for health. When this becomes unbalanced or blocked, illness can result. Imbalance and disruption to the flow of qi can be caused by changes in the external environment, such as weather conditions, viruses, or injury, or internally from emotions, poor nutrition, or a constitutional predisposition. Chinese medicine recognises a strong link between the reproductive system and the mind and emotions, and it follows that anxiety and stress can contribute to menstrual problems and infertility.

Acupuncture and IVF

Chinese doctors have known for centuries that acupuncture improves fertility, but this is now confirmed by recent clinical studies showing that acupuncture treatment improves the success rates for in-vitro fertilization (IVF) in many women. A clinical trial conducted at the University of Adelaide found higher pregnancy rates in women undergoing IVF when they also received acupuncture (*Smith et. al., 2006*). Danish researchers reported similar results, with an almost doubled pregnancy rate in those receiving acupuncture in conjunction with IVF or intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) compared with a control group (*Westergaard et. al., 2006*).

Effects of Acupuncture

Acupuncture promotes the circulation of blood in the pelvic cavity, enhancing uterine blood flow and the quality of the uterine lining. Acupuncture helps to regulate and balance hormone levels to improve the function of the ovaries, producing better quality eggs and greater numbers of follicles. At the same time acupuncture treatment is very relaxing and can reduce stress and anxiety, and assists in lessening the side effects of some drugs used in IVF. Certain acupoints keep the uterus in a state of normal relaxation, preventing uterine contractions, and decreasing chances of miscarriage.

Beneficial results from combining acupuncture treatment with IVF include increased number of follicles, thickened uterine lining and increased number of embryos, resulting in greater chances of pregnancy. Other gynaecological problems can also benefit from the enhanced pelvic blood flow, improved ovarian function and balanced hormone levels that can result from acupuncture treatment. An irregular menstrual cycle will become more regular, period pain reduced, and premenstrual disorders relieved.

Treatment

Acupuncture in the months leading up to an IVF cycle helps to regulate the menstrual cycle and balance hormone levels. By treating the root causes of infertility, some patients may even fall pregnant during this preparation time (a pleasant side effect when it happens!), while the chance of a successful IVF cycle is increased.

A course of acupuncture is generally 6 weekly treatments, with a break midway to allow the body to adjust. Further courses of treatment may be undertaken as needed, and the timing of treatments should be flexible during an IVF cycle to optimise results.

Studies from:

Smith et. al., *Journal of Fertility & Sterility* 2006: 85; 1352-58

Westergaard et. al., *Journal of Fertility & Sterility* 2006: 85; 1341-46

Paulus et.al., *Journal of Fertility & Sterility* 2002: 77; 721-24

Liang, L., *Acupuncture & IVF*, Boulder Blue Poppy Press, 2003

Mary-Jo Bevin

Mary-Jo Bevin is registered with the Victorian Chinese Medicine Registration Board for both acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.

After completing a Bachelor of Science with honours she studied Chinese medicine at RMIT University, obtaining a Bachelor of Applied Science in Chinese medicine.

Her final year was an internship at the Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Nanjing, China, with clinical training in gynaecology, internal medicine, paediatric, dermatology, acupuncture and tuina.

Mary-Jo specialises in acupuncture for gynaecology, focusing on fertility.