



Factsheet: Fertility & Pregnancy

About Infertility

Infertility is a common condition in the UK affecting one in six women and men. The causes in women vary widely and can include functional problems, such as abnormal hormonal levels, ovulation problems (polycystic ovarian syndrome accounts for about 70% of cases of female infertility), organic reasons (inflammatory pelvic disease (PID) causes infertility in 1 in 5 women), or endometriosis, which accounts for at least 30% of female infertility cases. Over 25% of infertility cases are attributable to male infertility, which includes . 'Unexplained infertility' is the most common reason in both sexes; 35% of all infertility cases around the world are classified as 'unexplained'.

Inability to conceive after at least a year of regular sexual intercourse without the use of contraceptives can be due to causes that lie either in the man or the woman or both. Identification of the underlying causes is the key to successful treatment. Infertility can be either temporary or, in a small percentage of cases, permanent.

Western Medicine View

Depending on the cause of the fertility problems, Western medicine generally has two approaches to treating subfertile couples. The first is assisted fertilisation, where the doctor feels that conception inside the uterus is possible. This usually involves drugs to artificially stimulate egg production or the artificial delivery of sperm into the vagina. If the doctor feels that conception inside the uterus is not possible then treatment turns to assisted reproductive technologies, such as IVF, where the fertilization is performed in a laboratory and then implanted in the uterus. If there are any structural causes for infertility, surgery may be recommended.

Western medicine offers many sophisticated tests and procedures to investigate and improve fertility and has been miraculous for some couples. However, there is more difficulty in treating individuals where there is a failure to conceive, despite the reproductive organs appearing to work well.

Chinese Medicine View

According to Chinese medicine theory, reproductive health is primarily influenced by the health of the Kidneys. The Kidney essence feeds the reproductive organs and maintains their health. If the Kidneys become weak (most commonly due to age), then the sexual health of the person declines. Men start to lose their sex drive and sperm production becomes less efficient. Women also lose their sex drive and their ability to conceive, which eventually causes menopause. It is therefore essential to boost the Kidneys.

The Kidneys are directly affected by two other organs - the Liver and the Spleen. The Liver is the organ which governs emotions and therefore during periods of emotional pain or stress, the Liver will weaken, which will in turn weaken the Kidneys. The Spleen is the organ most affected by diet. A poor diet will cause the Spleen to overwork and this will also weaken the Kidneys.

The most common syndromes found in fertility patients are deficiency, stagnancy, heat and cold syndromes. A person is said to be deficient if they are weak in any particular area of their body. Many subfertility patients suffer from deficiency syndrome due to a weakness of the Liver and Kidneys. When fluid and energy is not weak but is unable to move properly through the body, they will have stagnation or stasis. Heat helps to power the body's circulation but excessive heat consumes the body fluid and causes organs to function abnormally. Cold, on the other hand, slows down the body leading to blockages and stasis. It is common to see a combination diagnosis of Liver Qi stagnation, Kidney Qi deficiency, blood stagnation, blood deficiency, Spleen Qi deficiency or dampness.

According to Chinese medicine theory, acupuncture and Chinese herbs can help to treat unexplained fertility problems by regulating the body's functions, removing any deficiency or stagnation, boosting the Kidney, Liver and Spleen, and returning the body to a balanced state to optimise conception.

Evidence for Treatment with Acupuncture

According to the World Health Organisation, acupuncture has a proven effect on female fertility. There are few clinical trials on acupuncture for natural fertility (as opposed to as an adjunct to assisted conception) in the West, although the evidence from these is positive. Randomised trials in China have demonstrated significantly better pregnancy rates for acupuncture than medication, although the studies may not be as high quality.

Acupuncture may benefit fertility by promoting the release of beta-endorphin in the brain, which can regulate fertility hormones and reducing the hormonal imbalances caused by stress, which can negatively impact fertility. It can increase the blood flow to the reproductive organs, by inhibiting the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system by stress and enhancing the development of the ovarian follicles. It can also increase the blood flow to the uterus, improving the thickness of the endometrial lining and increasing the chances of embryo implantation.

Acupuncture has an effect on fertility problems caused by PCOS. It can reduce the number of ovarian cysts, stimulate ovulation, enhance blastocyst implantation and regulate the menstrual cycle in women with PCOS by reducing sympathetic nerve activity and balancing hormone levels. It may be able to contribute to controlling secondary effects of PCOS, such as obesity and anorexia.

Clinical Trials and Articles

Female Fertility

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