

## **The Point of Getting Pregnant ; Acupuncture May Help With in Vitro Procedure**

The newest technology has been joined by an ancient form of Chinese medicine at the Reproductive Medicine & Fertility Center in Colorado Springs.

Combining in vitro fertilization, or IVF, with acupuncture, a 5,000-year-old practice, appears to pay off for couples yearning to have a child, says Dr. Paul Magarelli, a reproductive endocrinologist and medical director of the center.

Magarelli and Diane Cridennda, owner of East Winds Acupuncture, conducted a study involving 203 of his patients who underwent IVF; 105 had IVF alone and 98 also had a specified series of acupuncture treatments. The acupuncture group's pregnancy rate was 24 percent greater.

Magarelli presented his research last month before the World Congress on Human Reproduction in Venice, Italy. Previous studies, including research in Germany and China, also have pointed to the benefits of adding acupuncture to assisted-reproduction technologies.

Despite being deathly afraid of needles, Jo Ann Davis is among Magarelli's in vitro patients who underwent acupuncture.

"I do believe it had an impact," she says. As evidence, she points to her twins, a boy and a girl, who celebrated their first birthday recently.

In vitro fertilization involves harvesting eggs from a woman's ovaries and fertilizing them in a laboratory dish with a man's sperm. The resulting embryo is then transferred to the uterus.

According to the protocol followed by Magarelli and Cridennda, acupuncture sessions were twice a week for four weeks before retrieval of the eggs, and then just before and after the embryo transfer. Electro-stim acupuncture, involving a mild electrical current, was used.

Women generally find the sessions relaxing, Cridennda says. "Most of the girls say, when they start to get to the last of their pretransfer treatments, 'Man, I'm going to miss my needle nap.'"

With Davis' needle phobia, it wasn't all that relaxing. But it wasn't painful, either. She felt a vibration or tingling with the first sessions and a deep "stirring" with the final two.

"I could feel that right at my core, so that was pretty amazing."

Magarelli was dubious when Cridennda, a doctor of Oriental medicine who trained in Beijing, approached him five years ago about using acupuncture for his patients.

But after Cridennda showed him data from some small studies -- and after he became convinced it would at least cause no harm -- Magarelli began sending her his patients who were having the most trouble becoming pregnant.

"What he noticed was, gee, they were getting pregnant," Cridennda says.

In addition to an increased pregnancy rate in the acupuncture group, the rate of ectopic pregnancies "was almost nonexistent," Magarelli says -- 1.5 percent vs. 4.7 percent. In vitro fertilization is associated with an increased risk of ectopic pregnancies, in which the fertilized egg attaches someplace other than inside the uterus.

Acupuncture involves the insertion of hair-thin needles at precise points to correct the flow of qi, or life energy.

How it may help reproduction isn't clear, but it has been shown to increase blood flow into the uterus. It also may help by reducing stress.

Magarelli wants further research with more patients and is encouraging larger centers to conduct studies.

His objectivity, he says, may be compromised. Once skeptical of acupuncture, he's now a believer.

He decided to experience acupuncture for himself after Cridennda approached him.

"I said I wouldn't recommend anything without trying it. That first time, I walked in and there are fountains and tinkling noises and the mood music, and I'm like, 'Oh, what am I doing here?'"

But he found it relaxing and now goes to Cridennda regularly for acupuncture.

To his surprise, it even gave him relief from a repetitive-motion injury in his hand.

"He couldn't believe it," Cridennda said. "He would laugh, 'Oh my gosh, the pain is gone.'"

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