

Natural Medicine and Infertility

Fact Sheet

22

updated May 2011

Natural Medicine includes a number of different treatments which may be employed together or separately, having a different approach to, and effect on, infertility and associated problems, compared to orthodox medicine. Most natural medicine practitioners will approach any health condition holistically – that is, in a manner which takes into account all aspects of the health of the patient/s. Natural medicine is practised in such a way as to raise the general health and well-being of the patient/s, as well as targeting any specific problem. The reason for this is the understanding that all aspects of health (or ill-health) affect each other, whether physical, emotional, mental or, in some cases, spiritual. The underlying belief is that a healthy body is a fertile body, and that infertility may result from the interaction of a number of conditions.

The following is meant only as a guide. Different practitioners will treat a similar state in different ways, and there may well be aspects of natural medicine not mentioned here which are also effective.

Natural medicine practitioners treat the patient in such a way as to assist the body back to normal healthy functioning, where possible, rather than devise ways and means of bypassing problems. They believe that bypassing a problem, or creating an 'artificial' state of health in an organ or system, will be a less satisfactory outcome. It is often true, however, that natural medicine treatments can take longer to achieve their goals. But this is certainly not always the case and since it is believed these treatments are sometimes successful where orthodox medicine is not, the resulting conception may arrive sooner than would have been the case employ-

ing orthodox methods. In some cases it may be possible to combine appropriate measures from both natural and orthodox approaches, though each practitioner will have his/her own policies on this.

There is little to lose by choosing to treat infertility naturally, because general health and also emotional health should improve. There is benefit from the self-help aspect of many natural therapies, as the patient/s feel they are active in managing their own recovery. Some of the treatments commonly used by natural medicine practitioners are:

- nutrition
- timing techniques
- herbal medicine (Western and Chinese)

- osteopathy / chiropractic
- hypnotherapy and psychotherapy
- 'environmental' medicine

Nutrition

Generally, practitioners of any form of natural medicine will give advice on what to eat, what not to eat, fasting programs to assist with detoxification and nutritional supplements.

There has been research from the Foresight Association in England (an association of medical doctors specialising in pre-conception care) showing the effects of good and bad nutrition before conception on the viability of both the baby and the pregnancy.

Natural Medicine and Infertility

This research shows that with good pre-conception nutrition, the risk of miscarriage drops from 1 in 36 to 1 in 396 (*Journal of Nutritional and Environmental Medicine*, Oct.'95). The rate of conception in previously infertile situations is similarly much improved.

Since sperm take approximately three months to generate, all nutritional supplementation regimes and dietary changes need to be in place for a minimum of four months before conception is attempted, for best results. This advice is given to all prospective parents, but is especially relevant for people with fertility problems.

Timing Techniques

Ensuring the correct timing of intercourse can aid fertility by making use of fresh, healthy sperm and eggs. By charting body symptoms such as cervical mucus and basal body temperature, it is possible to determine when ovulation occurs. Intercourse can then be timed to coincide with the day before ovulation, after three to five days of abstinence, to allow the first swarm of healthy sperm to be ready and waiting for the eggs. Practitioners may use mucus, symptom-thermal and Billings methods to interpret ovulation cycles. Some also use a bio-rhythm, or 'lunar cycle', to help optimise fertility at the time of conception.

Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine has been practised since time immemorial and is the basis of all pharmacopoeia. The herbs can be encapsulated and dried, used as fluid extracts, or taken as teas. Fluid extracts are usually the preferred form as they allow for individual, flexible prescribing. Most practitioners use herbs which come from an Anglo-American, Chinese or Indian tradition, with an increasingly eclectic ethnic base. Herbal medicine can have a direct 'physiological' effect, as a chemical drug would or operate on a principle of 'toning' – that is, bringing the organ

or system back to normal, healthy functioning. Because of the complexity of the active principles in herbs, there is seldom a single unbalanced effect, and different actions tend to complement and compensate for each other. Herbs are very powerful and gentle in their action, and can be used to treat both acute and chronic, short-term and long-term conditions. Because they have traditionally been dispensed by women practitioners, there is a wide range of herbs available for treating reproductive and fertility problems.

Osteopathy and Chiropractic

Osteopathy and chiropractic are particularly useful in relieving congestion in the lower body, and enlivening the blood and nerve supply to the reproductive organs. Treatment is via soft tissue work, such as massage and stretching and balancing of muscles, and by spinal and skeletal adjustments.

Hypnotherapy and Psychotherapy

Because stress has a direct effect on hormonal balance, all stress conditions can be seen as unhelpful to fertility. Unfortunately, most infertile couples experience some stress, and this can be a contributing factor to their condition. Hypnotherapy, where the subject is taken into deep relaxation and given suggestions, can be very effective for relieving stress and calming anxieties and fears. It can also change negative expectations, boosting confidence, optimism and motivation.

Psychotherapy, which might employ a number of different techniques, can be helpful in maintaining a positive attitude toward resolution of the fertility problem, and in helping the couple to deal with any relationship problems which may occur as a result.

Environmental Medicine

There is a growing number of practitioners, both medical and naturopathic, who deal with this area of modern, lifestyle disease.

They treat Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, post-viral conditions, allergies, and compromised immune systems, with an emphasis on changing lifestyle and eating patterns, uncovering allergies and avoiding pollutants. Most naturopaths use these principles as a matter of course.

Natural medicine may be helpful in all reproductive and fertility disorders. Even those who need to use assisted conception techniques, such as women with irreparable damage to their fallopian tubes, could benefit from using natural methods to help the reproductive system back to optimum health.

Other treatments not discussed here include:

- ❖ homeopathy
- ❖ acupuncture
- ❖ detoxification/chelation
- ❖ meditation
- ❖ relaxation and stress control therapies
- ❖ reiki and spiritual healing therapies which deal with flows of energy through the body

Idiopathic Infertility

One of the best uses of natural medicine is for 'idiopathic' or unexplained infertility, because natural medicine does not have to be targeted at a specific problem. Unexplained infertility can respond to natural medicines, good nutrition and correct timing techniques. A helpful natural approach could assist even severe reproductive problems. Idiopathic infertility may be treated with nutritional therapy; timing techniques; herbal treatments; homeopathy; acupuncture; stress control, psychotherapy or hypnotherapy; osteopathy or chiropractic. Following is a list of some common conditions and how they might be treated.

Natural Medicine and Infertility

Disorders of Female Fertility

Endometriosis

Nutrition and detoxification are important here. Endometriosis is usually treated as one or a combination of a hormone imbalance, autoimmune disease or breakdown of the endometrium. Appropriate treatment is herbs and/or acupuncture. Possible contributing factors which might also be treated could include allergies, a dysfunctional immune response, malabsorption, or systemic Candida infections. Treatment also focuses on alleviating symptoms, and could be long or short term.

Polycystic Ovarian Disease

Treatment is usually lengthy, though often successful. Herbs can be used to combat the cystic and hormonal imbalance factors in the condition, as can acupuncture. A combination of these treatments is especially useful. Pelvic congestion and toxicity are also targeted, with 'tonifying' treatments for normal ovarian function.

Hormonal Imbalance

Natural medicine treatments can be effective in restoring hormonal imbalance.

Amenorrhoea (absence of periods)

This would be treated according to the perceived underlying cause.

Pituitary Dysfunction

Herbal and nutritional medicine can be very effective in restoring normal functioning of the pituitary/ovarian axis, and in restoring balance to disturbed pituitary hormones, such as raised prolactin. Acupuncture may also be helpful.

Fibroids

Treatment can be effective, but is often lengthy.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease

Herbal medicine is the primary treatment for this disease, and also recovery from its effects, such as adhesions on the tubes. Certain nutrients, such as Vitamins A and E, are also specifically required for recovery. While complete recovery is not always possible in cases of severe scarring, natural medicine can enhance chances of success and recovery from surgery.

Ectopic Pregnancy

With treatment before conception, there may be a reduced chance of an ectopic pregnancy.

Miscarriage

Herbal medicine can be particularly effective in preventing miscarriage once a pregnancy is underway. Some herbs which have a benign suppressive effect on the immune system can help to prevent the rejection of an embryo which has been transferred to the uterus in an assisted conception program. The best preventative for miscarriage is pre-conception care, including good nutrition (for both parents), avoidance of all toxins, pollutants and drugs, and a thorough check for infections. Foresight has recently implicated 'hidden infections' in the cervix as a major cause of miscarriage.

Cervical Damage

Topical application of vitamins and herbs may help correct damage to the cervix from erosion or surgery.

Hostile Mucus and Antibodies

If the mucus is too acidic, nutrition and herbs can correct it. If this is insufficient, any treatment such as herbs or acupuncture for instance, can normalise oestrogen production. Herbs containing phyto-oestrogens can be helpful. Where a woman's body is producing sperm antibodies, a successful strategy is to use condoms for

several months to desensitise the woman's body, while working on her immune system through immune-enhancing herbal medicines. High levels of toxins in the sperm (e.g. lead or other heavy metals) can also be treated by natural therapies.

Foetal Abnormalities

Correct pre-conception nutrition, thorough investigation and treatment of infections, avoidance of all allergens and toxins and correct toning can lower the incidence of abnormalities.

Disorders of Male Fertility

Low Sperm Count and Poor Motility

These disorders respond well to reproductive tonic herbs, acupuncture and nutrition, and to a scrupulous avoidance of toxins, pollutants and allergens.

High Abnormal Sperm Levels

Special care is needed to track down any environmental pollutants or toxins and to ensure good nutrition for at least four months before conception.

Hormone Imbalances

Treated as for women.

Disorders of Reproductive Organs

Usually respond well to herbal medicine, nutrition and acupuncture.

Infections

As for women, these can be a cause of miscarriage and fertility problems. Both partners must be cleared of a full range of possible infections.

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Suggested Reading

☼ Natural Fertility

Naish, F. (1991). Sally Milner, Sydney

☼ Planning for a healthy baby

Barnes, B. and Bradley, S.G. (1990). Foresight, Ebury Press, London

☼ Women's Health

Cabot, S. (1987). Pan Books, Sydney

☼ It could be allergies and it can be cured

Alexander, P. (1990). Davont, Sydney

☼ The Billings Method

Billings, E. and Westmore A. (1980). O'Sullivan, Melbourne