

Maybe alternative baby

Can complementary therapies really help couples desperate to have children? Apparently so, discovers Sally Brown

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Conventional medicine can offer much to those with fertility problems, yet more and more people are turning to alternative therapies before embarking on the process of assisted conception, while others use such therapies to help them deal with the side-effects of drug-based treatments and to support them through IVF.

Therapists are keen to stress that they don't offer a magic solution, however. Their aim, they say, is simply to get both partners into optimum condition physically and mentally, so conception can happen naturally. Even so, many have high success rates: acupuncturist Roisin Golding, for example, who practises at Panakeia in London, claims that 60% of those who come to her with fertility problems become pregnant.

Some practitioners, especially those in traditional Chinese medicine, also aim to identify and remove any "blocks" to conception. "In Chinese medicine, the whole orchestra of the body must be tuned together to work in harmony," explains Golding. "It can redress very subtle imbalances, such as a poor womb lining, that aren't picked up by conventional medicine, and also classifies several categories of infertility, such as an energy block that prevents conception, or a weakness in the area that supports conception." According to Golding, the acupuncturist aims to redress any hormonal imbalances that may cause period problems, and also looks at general health issues such as stress, insomnia and digestion problems, all of which can affect conception. Needles are placed on the "conception vessel" meridian, which runs from the perineum to the chest, and which is believed to regulate hormones and so prepare the womb for pregnancy.

Another acupuncturist, Mina Hari, who works in Waterloo, London, has many patients referred to her by IVF consultants. "Having acupuncture improves the chances of IVF," she says, "but it also minimises the physical toll that the process takes on the body." Her first aim is to restore a natural 28-day menstrual cycle (any variations from this norm suggest an imbalance in the body's chi, or energy system) and then ensure that there is abundant energy

flowing to the womb, and that there are no blood deficiencies, such as anaemia.

Reflexologists, too, maintain that energy blocks can prevent conception, and that manipulating the foot can correct the problem. Their success has been such that a two-year trial is now under way at the IVF unit of Derriford Hospital, Plymouth, run by reflexologist Jane Holt, who approached the unit after 13 of the 23 women she treated for a range of fertility problems became pregnant last year. "Infertility is a complex problem," says Holt, "and often what is needed is something that gives the system a bit of a kick-start. That's what reflexology can do." In the study, 150 volunteers will be offered reflexology instead of the fertility drug clomifene, which is usually used to induce ovulation.

A lesser-known therapy that has a surprisingly high success rate is the Bowen Technique, a hands-on method better known for treating tennis elbow, which involves manipulating muscles, tendons and ligaments to trigger the body's own healing mechanism. "For infertility, we use a particular system of moves that addresses the endocrine [hormonal] system and the pelvic area," says Dr Jaimini Raniga at the Hale Clinic, London. "Mental and emotional stress can cause muscles to tighten and restrict the natural blood-flow, lymphatic drainage and nerve supply of the body, which can all affect fertility." Women see Raniga for a session on the first day of their menstrual cycle and are then told to abstain from intercourse until after a second session, on day 14. "Most of my patients conceive after two sessions," she adds.

But fertility problems are not always physical, say some. "There are well-documented cases of psychogenic infertility," says London-based psychologist and hypnotherapist John Butler. "It's a poorly understood area, but we do know that the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system are both influenced by the mind." Butler has also treated clients with a subconscious fear of pregnancy caused by relationship doubts or fear of the responsibility of being a parent. "I use hypnotherapy to give them suggestions for relaxation, confidence and positive thinking, then get them to imagine ovulation, conception and the growth of the foetus," he says.

He is quick to stress, however, that psychogenic infertility is rare. "Just because your doctor can't find a physical reason for your fertility problems doesn't mean it's all in the mind; there may be problems the medical profession is unaware of. But I do know that couples who are feeling under pressure from the whole process of trying to conceive will benefit from some form of relaxation therapy."