



Seeking a Child: Infertility Treatments with Chinese Medicine

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Seeking a Child, as the quest for fertility was referred to in ancient China, has an honoured place in classical Chinese medical literature. Many volumes of ancient texts elaborate on the functional differences between men and woman, the 'Arts of the Bed Chamber', the close study of the menstrual cycle, and the practice of nurturing life. Fertility, like longevity, was extremely important to the ancient Chinese people.

As a doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) who has seen many fertility success stories, I am convinced that the Chinese medical treatment of infertility continues to be as effective and relevant as it was thousands of years ago. TCM-based fertility treatment is especially significant, not only for younger couples with difficulty conceiving, but also for the many women who delay their attempts to have children until their late thirties or early forties. Indeed, many clinical studies in North America and Europe have shown TCM practice to increase significantly the chances of conception and healthy pregnancies.

Because TCM operates from a non-western conceptual and practical framework, interested couples often do not initially know what to expect from a consultation with a TCM doctor. During a typical consultation, a TCM practitioner will go through a detailed system of diagnostic procedures to assess where in the network of the organs and meridians there is imbalance and how the body can be helped to return to its optimal state of equilibrium. Diagnosis at this stage is usually based on comprehensive inquiry, inspection of complexion, skin, and tongue, palpation of the abdomen and pulse taking. Comprehensive inquiry includes elaborate questioning regarding bodily functions, sleep patterns, emotional tendencies, appetite and dietary history, as well as many other details that allow the practitioner to make an informed diagnosis grounded in TCM theory.

One of TCM's most unique elements is its process of differentiation—the way it interprets patterns leading to a mode of treatment. TCM practice lets go of specifically naming diseases and instead focuses on assessing patterns in the body, which vary from person to person even those with the same 'disease'. As a result, treatment is rarely the same for two people with the same western pathology. Five women with endometriosis, for example, will have five completely different TCM treatments plans. This would also be the case for five women with unexplained infertility or five men with poor sperm morphology. Every treatment plan is unique and individualized. This mode of differentiation may seem mysterious to those used to the western medical approach, but TCM has its own complex internal logic that has proven itself over time

Of course, the outcomes of TCM fertility treatment can be expressed using western anatomical terminology. They are to improve the quality of the endometrial lining, to increase blood flow to the reproductive organs, to regulate the hormones, to support menstrual irregularities and discomforts, and to improve organ function. TCM has the additional goal of regulating qi (energy) and balancing yin and yang in the body thereby improving digestion and sleep, easing stress, and improving overall health.

Fertility treatment also includes any other correlated concerns a person may be dealing with. In fact, in TCM *everything* is correlated and treatment is systemic. A strong healthy child is the most obvious and desired outcome in these treatments, but improved overall health along the way is the beautiful bonus: healthier pregnancies, faster recoveries, and a stronger foundation for future pregnancies—and on a whole a healthier and happier body.

Women and men seek TCM fertility treatment for many different reasons. Conditions commonly seen in TCM clinical treatment of infertility are advanced maternal age, polycystic ovarian syndrome, endometriosis, high levels of follicle stimulating hormone, hypothyroidism or other hormonal irregularities, luteal phase defects, recurrent pregnancy loss, structural abnormalities, sperm abnormalities, varicoceles, and diagnosed unexplained infertility. General ongoing preconception and post-conception care is also an important aspect of TCM fertility support.

Treatments consist of acupuncture, along with cupping and or moxibustion, Chinese herbal medicine and diet therapy. As in ancient times, fertility treatment is supplemented by lifestyle and behavioural

recommendations. Excessive behaviours are warned against, such as extreme and improper emotions, improper eating and drinking, physical exhaustion and prolonged staring, sitting, standing, walking or lying. 'Life cultivation' and proper dietary practices are of the utmost importance. Any troubles that persist outside of these guidelines are treated with herbal and acupuncture prescriptions.

Despite their profoundly different conceptual paradigms, there is no adversarial relationship between TCM and western medicine, and it is not uncommon for western and TCM treatments to have a complimentary effect. In fact, in China's general practice of medicine dual treatments are the norm and many TCM doctors are also concurrently qualified western physicians.

Here in British Columbia, your TCM doctor can work along side your GP or your medical reproductive endocrinologist to reduce the unwanted side effects of Clomid, for example, such as thinning of the endometrial lining, emotional instability and abdominal swelling. TCM is also effective in preparation for IVF (In vitro fertilisation) or ICSI (Intracytoplasmic sperm injection) cycles, significantly improving outcomes. It is also used in conjunction with certain medications to increase their effect, as in the case of progesterone therapy used in the treatment recurrent pregnancy loss. Together TCM and western medicine can move reproductive medicine forward.

Seeking a child is an exciting, rewarding quest. Grounded in ancient theory and practice, Traditional Chinese Medicine is proving to be current and relevant to women and men on their journey towards parenthood. Your doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine is there to help you along the way.