



TRIAGE

Making sense of health care

By Judith Graham

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Acupuncture for would-be moms

If it doesn't hurt, why not?

That was the informal consensus of fertility experts that I called to ask about a [recent study](#) on acupuncture and its fertility-enhancing effects.

None of the experts was sold on the quality of studies done on the topic. Research studies have been small and, in most cases, poorly designed, these fertility specialists said.

Still, the Chinese have turned to acupuncture for thousands of years to help women with fertility problems. And there are no known ill effects. So, doctors are willing to go along if patients want to try it.

The question is, what impact does this treatment have, if any?

Dr. Brian Kaplan, a fertility specialist at [Fertility Centers of Illinois](#), suspects there may be a placebo effect. If a patient thinks acupuncture will help and she becomes calmer and more "in tune with her body" that's important, he said.

Don't discount the benefit of making stressed-out women undergoing fertility treatments feel relaxed and perhaps more hopeful, Kaplan added.

That doesn't mean women should rely altogether on centers across Chicago—a surprisingly large number—offering fertility-enhancing acupuncture treatments, he said. If a woman has a physical problem that's interfering with fertility, she could lose valuable time pursuing this approach, he warns, advising patients to get a thorough medical evaluation.

Of course, the Internet is full of success stories of women who claim to have become pregnant only because of acupuncture. But so far, there's no solid scientific research backing those claims.

The study I wrote about applied only to women who combine acupuncture with in vitro fertilization—the mixing of an egg and sperm in a dish and the transfer of resulting embryos to her womb. When acupuncture therapy occurs just before and after an embryo transfer, the success rate for IVF jumps

about 65 percent, this analysis found.

During the therapy, women lie quietly, with music playing in the background and lights turned down low. Anywhere from 14 to 20 thin needles are placed on their abdomen, hands, legs, feet and ears and left there for 25 minutes at a time.

Some centers encourage women to start therapy as early as three months before the embryo transfer. This is the ideal, said Kim Sullivan of [Pulling Down the Moon](#), which provides acupuncture services to patients at Fertility Centers of Illinois. The goal is to “re-balance whatever is out of balance in the body” and stimulate “a lot of calming points for the patient.”

At about \$90 per session (\$150 for an initial consultation), the therapy can seem reasonably priced to women who have already spent enormous sums trying to have a baby.

While skeptical, fertility doctors appear willing to be open-minded if patients are convinced acupuncture is what they want.

“I think the evidence is still limited,” said Dr. Mark Hornstein, president of the [Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology](#) and director of the Center for Reproductive Medicine at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. “But there’s no good evidence it’s harmful and the downside is low, so why not?”