

Acupuncture may help increase IVF success rates by 65%

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Acupuncture can increase the chances of getting pregnant for women undergoing fertility treatment by 65%, a review of the evidence concludes today.

Acupuncture, which involves inserting fine needles under the skin at particular points in the body depending on the condition being treated, has long been used in China to help with a range of diagnoses, including regulating female reproduction.

To establish how effective the treatment is, doctors in the US collated evidence from all relevant, well-conducted studies and published their conclusions in today's British Medical Journal.

Eric Manheimer, research associate at the centre for integrative medicine at the University of Maryland school of medicine and colleagues looked at seven studies. All had been published in English since 2002 and conducted in four different western countries. The trials involved 1,366 women undergoing in vitro fertility treatment - where eggs and sperm are removed and mixed in the laboratory and one or more resulting embryos returned to the womb.

In the trials some women were given genuine acupuncture, others "sham" acupuncture, such as putting needles in the wrong places, and some no treatment at all. Overall the genuine acupuncture improved a woman's chances of pregnancy by 65%. All the acupuncture took place within a day or so of embryo transfer. Not all the pregnancies would have resulted in a live birth. In trials where the clinic's pregnancy rate was already high, there was a smaller, non-significant increase. Manheimer said the results were not necessarily a reason for every infertile woman to seek out acupuncture.

"I think the findings should be regarded as somewhat preliminary," he said. "Acupuncture can improve the rates of pregnancy and live birth. Some couples might want to choose acupuncture but others might want to wait until further research has been done."

But Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at the Peninsula medical school, Exeter, urged caution. "IVF may not seem to be 'placebo-prone' but it probably is: if women expect it to be helpful they are more

relaxed, which in turn would affect pregnancy rates."

Manheimer argued a placebo response was unlikely, arguing that acupuncture may stimulate the body to produce neurotransmitters which influence the menstrual cycle, ovulation and fertility.

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