



# REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & ASIAN MEDICINE\*

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*\*\*A similar article by Claire Cassidy was published in the 'Oriental Medicine' Column of Pathways Magazine, Mind, Body, Spirit Resources in the Washington DC Area, Spring 2006.*

DID YOU KNOW that acupuncture care is helpful for nearly any reproductive health issue for both women and men? We shouldn't be too surprised. After all, Asian medicine has been dealing with reproductive health for several thousand years. In that time this Medicine has developed sophisticated ways to maintain or improve breast health, treat menstrual issues including PMS, support a healthy pregnancy, treat infertility and/or loss of the sexual urge, reduce uterine fibroids, help endometriosis pain, reduce menopause symptoms, improve prostate health, treat erectile dysfunction, and reduce symptoms associated with biomedical treatment for reproductive cancers.

So if you, or anyone you know, has reproductive system complaints, consult an acupuncturist! With the help of acupuncture, herbs, dietary modifications, and Qi Gung, most people improve or become well. Read on for detail!

## ***Reproductive Health as a Matter of Energy Flow***

Asian (Chinese, Oriental) medicine is an 'energy-based' medicine, which means that it explains disease and malfunction in terms of disordered energy flow. This energy, called Qi ("chee") flows everywhere in the universe and everywhere in us. You've heard of Yin and Yang: Yin Qi is (more or less) the more solid, cooler, earthier form of Qi, while Yang Qi is the more rarified, upward and warm expression of Qi. If Qi is blocked, or if there are deficiencies, symptoms arise.

To understand this better, let's take a look at a woman's monthly cycle (men's issues come later in the article). Start with the bleeding period—at this time a woman loses blood and with it, Yin energy. At the end of her period, a woman is relatively Yin deficient. This is normal, of course. The body responds by building up the Blood, and at the mid-point of the month, when Yin and Yang are in balance, ovulation occurs. For the rest of the month the balance favors increasing Yang energy, for Yang (in the end) must push the blood out of the uterus to start the cycle over again.

This wonderfully balanced and predictable cycle can be thrown off by many factors. Some are normal, such as pregnancy, which stops the monthly cycle and starts the body on a nine-month path that can be just as balanced and predictable as the monthly cycle.

Some factors create abnormality—symptoms that women don't like or experience as ill health. An acupuncturist listening to a patient hears how the energy is flowing...or not. The two basic conditions are of deficiency and excess. For example, lots of pain with the period and large clots in the menstruum signal excess. In contrast, thin or scanty blood, and a weak 'bearing down' sensation in the abdomen signal deficiency. To treat these—and many other conditions—the acupuncturist inserts tiny flexible stainless steel needles into carefully selected *acupoints*. The needles stay in for about 20 minutes, during which patients typically become relaxed, and symptoms begin to go away. The practitioner tracks progress by checking the pulses, which rapidly respond to needling. Pulses in balance indicate that the energy is flowing smoothly and evenly—now the body can re-orient itself in the direction of good health. The patient will notice improvements

over the next few days...and as treatment goes on, she will be able to 'hold' the treatment for longer and longer times.

How long will it take to remedy a reproductive complaint? It varies with how severe it is, how long the person has been troubled, and how willing she is to make needed lifestyle changes. Because most reproductive complaints follow a monthly cycle, patients should expect to remain in treatment for several months. This allows the body to 'practice' the new energetic pattern, and the person to learn how to maintain the improvements.

People often ask if they can receive acupuncture and herbal therapy while also receiving therapy from another source, such as biomedicine or chiropractic. Yes! Combined care can increase rate of response, and sometimes is necessary. So don't put off treatment because you worry about treading on someone's medical toes—today competent medical practitioners are eager to practice 'integrative' medicine because they see it as strongly benefiting patients.

### ***Menstrual Issues***

Readers will understand that I cannot go into a lot of detail here—enormous books are written on Asian approaches to reproductive health! Still, I'd like to say enough to encourage you to seek acupuncture care for your menstrual issues.

First, consider PMS. This bothersome-but-not-serious complaint involves pre-menstrual changes like craving sweets, bloating (abdomen, breasts), and mood changes like weepiness or irritability. All this is blamed on hormonal imbalance in biomedicine; in Asian medicine we interpret it as a relative excess of Yang, with stagnant flow. Treatment is logical and involves improving flow and supporting Yin with acupuncture and herbs. Together, these can often rapidly minimize PMS symptoms, allowing the woman to reclaim comfort a whole week out of every month.

Sometimes the start of menstruation itself is painful—cramps, backache, migraines, even fainting. The type of pain experienced is a major clue: if it is sharp, intense, stabbing it is excess, but pain that aches and drags one down is deficiency pain. A common cause of excess pain is "cold in the uterus"—signaled (among other things) by a cold lower abdomen, something a woman can feel for herself. In this case avoiding outdoors cold and chilly foods, and using warming herbs can help a woman 'warm up' so the pain goes away. In the office, the acupuncturist will often heat moxa herbs over acupoints—this is a pleasing and relaxing treatment that deeply warms the body.

Sometimes women's periods arrive too often or not often enough. Again, acupuncture and herbs can often repair this imbalance, supporting a predictable and comfortable cycle, which in turn supports fertility.

### ***Pregnancy & Fertility***

Acupuncture is an important wellness choice during pregnancy. Use it to control nausea, manage energy, and generally be well. However, choose an acupuncturist who has experience in treating pregnant women. Some acupoints are not used during pregnancy; some herbal combinations are also avoided.

Sometimes couples find it difficult to achieve or maintain pregnancy. Again, biomedicine and Chinese medicine can both treat infertility, though using different explanations of

what is happening. In the end, the different explanations should lead to the same outcome: a fertile woman or man, and a newborn baby.

A common cause of infertility in Oriental medicine is 'cold in the uterus'—the same issue that causes painful cramping at the outset of the period. We Oriental medicine practitioners think it is essential for a woman of reproductive age to keep her lower abdomen warm...and acupuncture, moxibustion and herbs are used to warm it in stubborn cases of 'internal cold.' Another cause is ineffective cycling—imbalance of energy (as we would say) or imbalance of hormones (as biomedicine would say). Acupuncture, often with herbs, can bring the cycle into normalcy, making the time of ovulation more predictable and encouraging ovulation. Uterine fibroids, and endometriosis, can also preclude fertility—again, the combination of acupuncture and herbs can cause fibroids to shrink and endometriosis to calm, thus enhancing fertility.

Sometimes women get pregnant but miscarry. In Chinese medicine we think miscarriage is as demanding as a full pregnancy, so treatment includes not only acupuncture and herbs, but also lifestyle changes involving sufficient rest and relaxation, high quality diet, and the recommendation to do meditative movement practices such as Qi Gung or yoga to enhance wellness and prepare the uterus to maintain a future pregnancy.

### ***Breast Health***

Asian medicine can help breast health by reducing bloating before the period, improving milk flow after delivery, reducing stagnation that causes breast pain and inflammation, and even by using herbs to enlarge the breasts for women who want 'more.'

### ***Menopause Issues***

While some women sail through menopause with barely a pause...others experience symptoms such as hot flashes, foggy brain, forgetfulness, irritability, weight gain, dry mucous membranes and the like. You can take hormones, and you can try a variety of herbs to control your symptoms. ***Or talk to an acupuncturist!*** Over the centuries Asian medicine has developed effective herbal combinations and needling protocols to improve memory, stop hot flashes, reduce dryness and generally keep aging woman feeling good and energetic.

### ***Men's Reproductive Issues & Asian Medicine***

If you've read this far you probably already know what I'm going to say: Yes, Chinese medicine can help men improve their prostate health, maintain their erectile ability, and improve their fertility. There are acupoints that address the male sexual organs on the lower back, lower abdomen, and on the legs (but none on the organs themselves). There are herbal combinations specifically designed to support male reproductive health, including improve testosterone production, sperm quality and sperm motility.

### ***Cancer Care***

Unfortunately, people rarely think of using Oriental medicine for cancer, yet it can be extremely helpful as an adjunct to biomedical care. Use acupuncture to prepare your body to be as well as possible during and after surgery, during and after chemotherapy or radiotherapy. There are also special herbal blends designed to help people on radio- and chemotherapy. Together herbs and acupuncture can reduce toxicity, nausea, and fatigue, and improve energy and mood.

### ***What Does the Research Say?***

Research on acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapy is still in its infancy, and what is available on reproductive health is spotty. Look for articles at [www.acupuncture.com](http://www.acupuncture.com).

Recent research has suggested that acupuncture can be beneficial in the treatment of a variety of hormone-mediated problems for both women and men. In one study, acupuncture proved a worthwhile approach to female infertility due to oligomenorrhea or luteal insufficiency (*Gynecological Endocrinology* 1992). Significantly, though both test groups profited equally, those on acupuncture had no side effects, while those on hormones did. In another study in a large sample of women undergoing in vitro fertilization procedures, adding acupuncture *doubled* the success rate (*Fertility and Sterility*, 2002). Other studies have shown that acupuncture and moxibustion (warming herbs) succeed in turning about 2/3 of breech presentations; and can successfully minimize both menopausal symptoms and menstrual problems such as irregularity, cramping, and PMS. Research has also shown that acupuncture can improve sperm quality, making it clearly useful in treating male infertility (Gurfinkel et al., 2003; Siterman et al., 1997; Riegler et al., 1984). The virtual absence of side effects with acupuncture, in contrast to the potential risks associated with biomedical hormonal intervention, make acupuncture especially appealing.

### ***One Woman and one Acupuncturist Speak***

A woman I know was so impressed by the effectiveness of acupuncture that she later became an acupuncturist herself. She says: "I had irregular periods and 2 miscarriages and biomedicine couldn't find anything wrong. After just 2 months of acupuncture I started having regular periods and soon after I got pregnant. Now I have two healthy children; the pregnancies and deliveries were easy!" As for your Author: I have treated several women for infertility...and they became pregnant. I am currently following a woman with recurrent early miscarriage, who is pregnant again...and so far, still pregnant after 4 months. I see many women with menstrual issues linked to other issues (such as irritable bowel syndrome or migraines) and they do well. I see many in the perimenopausal period, and they report benefit. I have worked with a woman with uterine infection (gone in 1 week) and with men with erectile dysfunction.

### ***In Sum***

Asian medical care offers an excellent and safe source of care for reproductive health concerns. As you consider this alternative remember: you'll be seeing your practitioner more often than with an MD, and will develop a close relationship with him or her—a lot of people appreciate this! Second, acucare is drug free, and even if your practitioner recommends herbs, the side-effect profile for Asian medicine is excellent—that is, it's very safe and comfortable. Last, acupuncture care puts you gently in touch with your body and its ways—thus caring for your reproductive issues with Oriental medicine can become a fascinating journey of self awareness.