

Adventures in Baby Making

... *Traditional Chinese Medicine style*

by Michelle Hancock

Dean and Aeri, a Vancouver couple in their mid-30s, tried to conceive naturally for two years. After getting medical check-ups and being told they had only a two to five per cent chance on their own, they opted for a mainstream medical approach for revving up fertility. Basically, it would entail injecting Dean's sperm into one of Aeri's eggs. It's highly invasive, involves powerful drugs, and costs about \$10,000 a try. They made an appointment but had to wait several months.

That wait added a fateful twist to their adventure in baby making. Several weeks later, following a lecture they attended on natural fertility methods, the couple found themselves drastically changing their lifestyle; they cut out coffee, chose organic foods, had acupuncture treatments, and used Chinese herbs and nutritional supplements.

"Before, I wasn't healthy at all—250 pounds, about 40 more than what I weigh now," says Dean, a consultant who spends a lot of time on the road, and was inactive and eating junk food. Was it tough to convert? "Not at all. We wanted a baby. I had to give the program every chance to succeed."

And it worked. The couple saw remarkable results with the help of an innovative protocol based on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) principles. The program was created by acupuncturist and herbalist Randine Lewis, Master of Science in Oriental Medicine with a PhD in alternative medicine, and documented in her book, *The Infertility Cure: the Ancient Chinese Wellness Program for Getting Pregnant and Having Healthy Babies*.

"In Chinese medicine, we want to get the body back into balance. We don't force a pregnancy into a body that says no. We get the body into a condition where it says yes," says Lewis, founder of the Eastern Harmony Acupuncture Clinic in Texas, where the success rate in patient pregnancies is 75 per cent. "Stress has an enormous impact on fertility. All mammals will not conceive under stress. The body can stop ovaries from producing eggs. Stop menstruation. Change the makeup of hormones. Shift blood flow away from reproductive organs. There are a multitude of shut-off mechanisms."



Revving Your Fertility – Naturally

Although Chinese herbs are specially prescribed and compounded for individual patients, acupuncturists Lewis and Brown give these suggestions for a supplement base to get you and your partner's bodies in fertile shape:

Essential fatty acids (fish-oil capsules): 700 - 1,000 mg/day. These are hormone regulators that are vital to the sound structure of cell membranes, body tissue, and brain development in the fetus. Caution taking with blood thinners.

Vitamin C: 500 mg/day. Prevents cell damage from free radicals.

Vitamin E: 400 - 800 IU/day. Deficiency may cause miscarriage. Taken with Vitamin C may improve ovulation. Caution taking with blood thinners.

Selenium: 200 mcg/day. Deficiency may cause infertility and increase risk of miscarriage.

Zinc: 7 - 30 mg/day. Important for producing good quality eggs and cell division in fetus, and maintaining the menstrual cycle.

B Vitamins (B-6): 50mg/day. Essential for formation and functioning of female sex hormones. Folic Acid: 200 mcg/day. Start at least three months before conception. Reduces risk of neural-tube damage in embryos. Pantothenic acid: up to 500 mg/day. Vital to fetal development and adrenal growth.

— MH

CHI, DESIRE, AND STRESS

To a TCM practitioner, pulse taking, examining a patient's tongue, noting physical appearance and mannerisms, and extensively reviewing lifestyle habits all offer insight into a person's health status. Treatment might include herbs, dietary and exercise adjustments, nutritional supplements, relaxation exercises, and acupuncture—the insertion of sterile, hair-thin needles into particular points on the skin to encourage *chi* (energy) flow.

“If chi flows freely and smoothly, there is balance and health. If chi doesn't flow freely and smoothly, both pain and disease can manifest,” says Lorne Brown, doctor of TCM, who implements Lewis's fertility techniques as clinical director of Vancouver's Acubalance Wellness Centre. He frequently sees patterns of liver chi stagnation—PMS, tender breasts, irritability, cramping—in women diagnosed with unexplained infertility. “This can result not just from poor diet, lack of exercise, and external pathogens, but also from unfulfilled desire and stress. In this case, the unfulfilled desire of having a baby.”

Blocked chi, often manifesting in unhealthy sperm, is also evident in the increasing number of men who visit Brown's fertility-focused practice. Intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), a costly, female-invasive procedure in which a single sperm is injected into a mature egg, is Western medicine's answer to male-factor infertility. But Brown has seen numerous couples become pregnant after using TCM to rebalance the body.

Dean and Aeri are a case in point. Three months into adopting their lifestyle changes, more testing revealed all Dean's male fertility factors were way up. The couple boosted their chances of natural conception every cycle at a local fertility clinic with intrauterine insemination (a process where sperm is deposited into the uterus artificially, which costs about \$200). Four to five months later, Aeri found out she was pregnant.

The ballpark \$4,000 they spent using a holistic approach became the foundation for their overall health. “It paid off in many more ways than getting pregnant. It was a wake-up call to respect my body,” says Dean.

Their eight-month-old son, Hartley, is just trembling through his first few baby steps. “Two years of trying to have a kid put a lot of pressure on us. Lots of disappointment every 28 days, when we realized we'd failed to conceive. [There was] more focus on having a baby than on having intimate moments with your wife.”

It's a problem many Canadian couples can relate to since an estimated one in six couples are infertile, defined as unable to conceive after one year of unprotected sex.

“Most couples complain that libido is lost,” says Brown. “Having fertility issues is one of the best ways to kill a sex life. Lots of stress equals more liver chi stagnation and the reproductive system shuts down. It's a vicious cycle.”

That's why a vital aspect of conception using Chinese medicine involves wrapping one's mind around concepts that are not common in Western mainstream medicine.

“One woman came to one of my retreats,” Lewis recalls. “A pharmacologist with a PhD. In the middle of a seminar, she stood up and said, ‘I didn't come here to let go. I came here to get pregnant!’”

Despite such frustration, Lewis counsels her patients to let go of fear. Take a month off trying. Refocus on intimacy and simply enjoy each other. “People view letting go as giving up,” she says. “They're afraid that, if they stop, they'll fail. It's counter-intuitive, but you'd be surprised how many get pregnant that month.”

Vancouver writer Michelle Hancock has yet to use Traditional Chinese Medicine to get pregnant, but she doesn't count it out