

I couldn't write a book about pregnancy without addressing the fact that getting pregnant in the first place isn't easy for everybody. Nothing brought this home to me more than when my wife Christiane and I struggled to conceive our daughter Charlotte. We were both young and healthy, so took our fertility for granted, never imagining it could take so long.

There is still so much to discover about why some people become pregnant easily and others don't. But what we do know is that there are several steps you can take to help you along the way. As Christiane and I prove, being healthy isn't a guarantee of fertility, but countless studies do link a healthy lifestyle to increased fertility, so making the right changes to your life will improve your chances. And taking control of your fertility is important, because when you're trying and failing to conceive you often feel powerless.

So this chapter, based on a combination of my work with clients who were trying to get pregnant, our own experience and the advice of some fantastic experts we met during that time, is my guide to increasing, protecting and extending your fertility.



INFERTILITY EXPLAINED

Jane is a world-renowned fertility specialist and Clinical Director of the Acupuncture IVF Support Clinic (www.acupunctureivf.com.au). She helps couples going through IVF to conceive with the help of Chinese herbs and acupuncture and she's amazing – she supported Christiane and me through a very difficult time. There are some experts who just stand out and Jane is one of them. We can't thank her enough.

I see a lot of unexplained infertility, like James and Christiane's, in my clinic. But what might be unexplained in orthodox medical terms may well have an explanation in Chinese medicine, which looks at more subtle and whole body factors. Infertility is "unexplained" if a couple has not conceived in a year of trying, and neither partner has been diagnosed with a condition which would affect their fertility. This includes, for women, endometriosis, polycystic ovarian disease, age (older than 38 years), tubal blockage or autoimmune conditions. For men infertility is diagnosed by certain parameters measured in a semen analysis which relate to the number of sperm, their shape, how well they swim and the integrity of their DNA.

When couples struggle to conceive – for whatever reason – they often feel incredibly frustrated. Sometimes having a label which leads to a definitive treatment is an easier diagnosis to cope with. However, treatments for many of the conditions that lead to infertility do not have simple and straightforward treatments with guaranteed outcomes.

Whether or not couples can help themselves depends on the cause of their infertility, but generally there is much couples can do to improve their fertility. Let's start with men, because it is often easier to improve sperm than it is eggs. Lifestyle factors make a big difference to the health of sperm, and the good news is that most of it is under your control. Heavy alcohol consumption has a deleterious effect on sperm count and function, but moderate drinking seems to do no harm. All relevant studies have shown the negative effects of tobacco or marijuana on sperm. If you're having difficulty giving up either of these, seek help immediately if you're trying to conceive. As for

coffee, a little bit is fine for most men, but more than three cups a day has been shown to damage sperm DNA. Being overweight is associated with decreased testosterone and increased oestrogen, neither of which is good news for your sperm count or quality. Now is a good time to start a weight-loss programme. Acupuncture can help control your appetite and accelerate weight loss.

Frequent sex improves the quality of sperm, while a few days' abstinence increases the quantity of sperm. So when the woman is ovulating, daily sex around this time is recommended. If not, have sex every second day from when her period finishes and continue for ten days (or more if she has a long cycle). We also know that men exposed to chemicals or fumes at their work place have lower sperm counts, so try your best to limit exposure. We know that electromagnetic radiation from mobile phones and laptops is associated with hormone changes and that long hours of use are associated with reduced fertility. Do not keep your mobile phone in the side pocket of your trousers and try to limit its use.

Lastly, a number of clinical studies have shown the beneficial effects of acupuncture and Chinese herbs in improving sperm quality and fertility. More than ten separate trials in a number of different countries have all shown a significant improvement in sperm morphology and motility after a course of acupuncture.

For women, the underlying cause (if there is one) needs to be addressed. Endometriosis is usually treated with surgery, and polycystic ovarian disease is often treated with drugs that reduce insulin levels (diabetes drugs) and drugs to induce ovulation if necessary. We don't yet have effective drug treatments for autoimmune conditions, except steroids which may be used in some situations. For age-related infertility, there is no drug treatment, although DHEA as a supplement might improve egg quality. Chinese medicine offers very good proven treatments for endometriosis and polycystic ovarian disease.

In my clinic we see couples with infertility and assess them from a Chinese medicine point of view. This means taking a thorough case history and looking at what investigations have been done already. All aspects of the body and mind are taken into account with a focus on the reproductive system, of course. Sometimes it is clear that Chinese medicine will not help improve fertility (for example, if the fallopian tubes are blocked) and we will refer the couple to an IVF clinic if they wish to take that route.

For most conditions related to infertility, including those that don't have a Western medicine label, a Chinese medicine programme can be formulated and we can expect good results. We use Chinese herbs, which are taken twice daily as a tea (a rather strong-tasting tea, but most people get used to it quickly). Acupuncture is done weekly or fortnightly, in the case of women for 3–6 months. For men

we treat once or twice a week, for 1–3 months, and then retest the sperm. Sometimes we work together with the IVF clinic to prepare a couple who have had previous IVF failures, in the hope that their chances are better with subsequent cycles.

We probably see as much secondary infertility as we do primary infertility. These couples are particularly frustrated because they know they have achieved pregnancy at least once before. Often the cause is unexplained from a Western medicine point of view, but Chinese medicine will usually find a cause that may be related to factors that have arisen since the first child or previous children – sometimes this is depletion of internal resources or stress which can upset the hormone balance. Sometimes it is related to age. Improving lifestyle factors like stress, sleep patterns and digestion often helps with this type of infertility.

I'm so glad I could help James and Christiane, who will share with you my advice – and plenty more from other experts and themselves – in this book. Good luck.'
BY JANE LYTTLETON BSc (Hons) NZ, MPhil Lond, Dip TCM Aus, Cert Ac, Cert Herbal Medicine, China

Generally there is much couples can do to improve their fertility.