

A closer look at the complementary benefits of acupuncture in the treatment of male infertility

Abstract

Infertility is a global issue that transcends race, culture, ethnicity, and nationality. The moral, behavioral, and biological sentiments associated with infertility globally cannot be understated. This can be viewed from the standpoint of producing offspring, fostering religious understanding, and maintaining certain societal values and privileges that come with having children. Infertility in a couple is described as the inability to conceive despite regular unprotected copulation for a period of one year.¹ It was estimated that about 11.4% of men between the ages of 15-49 in the United States between 2015 and 2019 experienced various forms of infertility.² The cost of treating and managing infertility is enormous, necessitating spending several thousand dollars and repeated cycles of assisted reproductive techniques (ART). It may, however, be beneficial to complement orthodox treatments with alternatives such as traditional Chinese acupuncture, which constitutes the main focus of this article.

Keywords: infertility, male infertility, Chinese acupuncture

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Abdulahkeem Jimoh

Department of Biology, Medgar Evers College, USA

Correspondence: Abdulhakeem Jimoh, Department of Biology, Medgar Evers College, City University of New York, USA

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Introduction

There are a multitude of causes closely linked with male infertility, which range from hormonal imbalance and disorders, physical abnormalities affecting the gonads, psychological disorders, mental health issues, unhealthy and questionable lifestyles, genetic disorders, and chromosomal abnormalities. Idiopathic causes are equally pertinent, accounting for up to 70% of cases, with the etiology remaining largely unknown.³

Acupuncture, by way of seeking complementary alternatives to conventional treatments that are expensive and associated with low success rates, offers a very promising option that is still largely unknown to the general public. Acupuncture is an arm of traditional Chinese medicine that evaluates the causes of infertility and related disorders as disruptions in the flow of energy (Qi) and blood circulation. Effective administration of acupuncture treatments in specific regions has yielded positive results, including improvements in sperm parameters and quality, as well as demonstrable regulation of hormonal imbalances.⁴

Discussion

Acupuncture usage in its best form to treat male infertility has shown reasonable improvement in sperm motility, volume, and morphology. The levels of follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinizing hormone (LH), which are critical for both spermatogenesis and testosterone production, have been optimized. This shift in hormonal activity may explain the response to acupuncture treatment. Another possible explanation for this effect is modulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis, which facilitates the actions of GnRH and gonadotropins (LH, FSH), leading to an eventual increase in testosterone and spermatogenic activity.⁵ Other assessments suggest decreases in cortisol levels and reactive oxygen species, thereby promoting a stress-free environment conducive to sperm formation and enhanced fertility. Idiopathic infertility, in which the causes are unknown, showed a remarkable improvement in sperm motility in a randomized controlled trial involving sixty men with idiopathic infertility and asthenospermia who received acupuncture and herbal therapies.⁶

Despite this encouraging development, it is absolutely necessary to address the important limitations of some of the aforementioned methodologies, which can be improved by considering larger sample sizes, more randomized, reproducible controlled trials, and more standardized acupuncture protocols and procedures that unify the expected inclusion and exclusion criteria for the trials.

Conclusion

Infertility, as described, is a global issue and forms a significant part of medical challenges that have both financial and psychological implications for couples. The success rate of the conventional treatment methods is low and can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Acupuncture, on the other hand, offers a safe, easily accessible, and affordable option that can significantly complement standard medical treatments.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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