

## Acupuncture in the first trimester of pregnancy

In my last article I looked at how Chinese medicine (which embraces acupuncture, herbal medicine, dietary therapy and exercise such as Tai Chi or Qi Gong) works by re-balancing our bodies. If we have pain, stress, or disturbed body functions, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) believes that our Qi (energy) is not flowing freely via a network of channels throughout the body, and the balance of Yin (nourishing, cooling and moistening) and Yang (active and warming) is out of kilter. I specifically examined how acupuncture (the insertion of very fine needles which are little more than a hair's breadth), may help with fertility problems. This article will look at how acupuncture can support early pregnancy.

One of the many things I love about TCM in relation to pregnancy is the ancient description of how the foetus is formed, how it grows and how the pregnant woman should care for herself. In today's culture where ultrasound scans are the norm, these descriptions, which originate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and encompass a mix of observational physiology with cosmology, may appear endearingly naïve, but as practitioners of TCM, we believe there is much wisdom to be gained from them.

Parental health at the time of conception is seen as vital as this directly influences the constitutional health of the child; from conception, the physical, emotional and spiritual health of the woman is vital in translating nourishment to the growing foetus, but it is also a time when a woman's health may be enhanced if she takes care of herself.

TCM teaches that the cessation of menses during pregnancy means there is more blood available within the woman's body – much of which will be utilised to nourish the foetus and then to transform into breast milk. If a woman is healthy with no blood or Yin deficiency, she is unlikely to suffer unduly when the growing foetus demands these resources. If however she enters the pregnant state with pre-existing deficiencies, these will be exacerbated.

In the first month of pregnancy, when the added demands on her blood are just beginning, TCM teaches she should eat nourishing, cooked and easily digested foods, as well as resting and avoiding exposure to excess heat or cold. Similarly, in the second month she should avoid physical work and excesses of temperature. Out of interest, from a historical viewpoint the ancient Chinese believed – rather quaintly – that in the third month the mother could start to influence her unborn child's gender and mind through certain behaviours: "if one wants a boy, one should practice archery ... If one wants a girl, one should wear hairpins ... and play with pearls and precious stones ... If one wants a child who will be beautiful ... look frequently at rings of white jade ... look at peacocks ..." <sup>1</sup>. The woman should be calm and quiet, avoiding any form of agitation. Of course with the advent

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<sup>1</sup> *Education of the Embryo 206 BC – 220 CE*

of modern medicine, we know that sex determination is genetic, but in ancient China medicine, religion, the supernatural, the natural world and the hierarchical ordering of mankind all moulded together to influence opinion.

Quaintness aside, the common theme defining these early months is the importance of the woman remaining restful and gentle with her energy. But, in our modern society, how realistic is this? More often than not, a woman is working, commuting, possibly juggling childcare with housework, gym sessions, weekend socialising, perhaps supporting older relatives ... and so the list goes on! It is unrealistic that a newly pregnant woman can rest to the extent TCM would advise yet, despite conventional Western thinking that she should just “carry on as normal”, there is a balance to be struck and I would certainly be advising ladies to modify their fast-paced lives and be mindful of the need to rest.

Approximately 80% of women will experience nausea and about 50% will experience vomiting in early pregnancy<sup>2</sup>. These may be provoked by increased hormone levels, a heightened sense of smell, stress or fatigue. Fortunately for most, these symptoms generally disappear by 12-16 weeks. From a TCM viewpoint we believe the symptoms of nausea and/or vomiting are created by the Qi of the stomach flowing ‘rebelliously’, i.e. upwards rather than downwards, largely caused by a deficiency of Qi within certain key organs of the body. Through the process of questioning, feeling the wrist pulses and observing the tongue/facial colouring, TCM interprets these findings into an individual diagnosis and treats with acupuncture accordingly. I find that treatment works most effectively if a woman attends twice weekly initially, once weekly thereafter. Following advice on the most appropriate foods for her TCM pattern of disharmony (for example, with a diagnosis of stomach heat or phlegm accumulation, different foods will be deemed more or less appropriate), regularity of eating (some women need to eat every hour!), maintenance of hydration and appropriate rest are also vital.

Hyperemesis is a more extreme form of nausea and vomiting often necessitating rehydration in hospital. Thankfully it is only experienced by approximately 1% of women<sup>2</sup>. Acupuncture may help by lessening the regularity of vomiting in a woman who is already suffering, possibly helping to prevent hospital admission or, if a woman suffered in a previous pregnancy, acupuncture may help prophylactically, thus preventing her getting into the same situation.

Constipation is not uncommon, particularly in early pregnancy when hormonal changes create a relaxation of the bowel wall muscles, alongside a possible reluctance to drink adequately due to nausea or the need to pass urine more frequently. Again, the acupuncturist seeks the underlying disharmony and treats accordingly, whether that is to gently dissipate Qi stagnation, or tonify a Yin deficiency.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

The fatigue that often accompanies the first trimester of pregnancy regularly surprises women – they comment that they need to be in bed by 8pm and are amazed that they can sleep right through till morning! Since it is just not appropriate to continue with a hectic lifestyle during pregnancy, adjustments should be made to accommodate the extra sleep necessary. TCM teaches that there is a process of “gathering, concentrating and storing”<sup>3</sup> during pregnancy which is Blood/Yin dominant – it is this Blood and Yin which creates a ‘form’ or embryo which then develops into the foetus. Hectic movement diverts blood away from the uterus to the muscles, which TCM believes may then adversely affect the developing foetus. Thus acupuncture is not aimed at giving a fatigued pregnant woman boundless energy so that she may carry on her busy lifestyle but, instead, the treatment tonifies underlying deficiencies so that she may feel more balanced and regain the necessary strength she needs to nourish herself and her developing baby.

It is quite normal that many women experience a period of anxiety and/or low mood during pregnancy; especially during the first trimester when they are generally feeling tired or may be suffering from nausea/vomiting. For some it may be transient and manageable, for others it may be longer lasting and overwhelming. In TCM, we believe that each organ of the body has a connecting emotion, that the health of the organs affects emotions and that long-lasting emotional states affect the energetic health of the organs. As practitioners, we look at dominant emotions involved (worry, anxiety, frustration etc.) and other symptoms such as sleep disturbance, colour of the tongue and quality of the pulse, then treat accordingly with acupuncture to re-harmonise the organs. Additionally we are likely to make lifestyle and dietary recommendations.

Acupuncture in pregnancy is becoming increasingly popular – largely because it is gentle, safe and offers a drug-free alternative for a multitude of pregnancy related discomforts. It is always recommended that if you plan to have acupuncture, you mention it to your midwife and you visit a British Acupuncture Council registered practitioner (MBAcC), preferably one who has post-graduate training in pregnancy acupuncture.

*Next time ... acupuncture in the second trimester ...*

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<sup>3</sup> Rochat de la Vallée E. 2007 Pregnancy and Gestation in Chinese Classical Texts