

Acupuncture in the second trimester of pregnancy

So far, I have looked at the use of acupuncture for enhancing fertility and for helping with first trimester discomforts. In this article, I'll look at how this system of medicine, which is being widely embraced by the Western world, can help in the second trimester of pregnancy and how the ancient Chinese viewed this stage of pregnancy.

It is not easy to attribute the discomforts of pregnancy to specific trimesters as they may well overlap, but I will look at the discomforts that women most commonly complain of in weeks fourteen to twenty-seven. Having said that, this may well be the trimester in which a woman feels most healthy; it is often in these weeks that she will be referred to by friends and family as "blooming".

The placenta has fully formed and the uterus starts to expand up into the mother's abdomen. The foetus has all its main organs formed and these continue to develop. It is usually around 20 weeks that a woman may start to feel fluttering movements of the foetus. Similarly, the ancient Chinese perceived that the foetus was a "human shape" by the end of the 12th week, and beginning the process of receiving vital essences from the mother enabling further development of its form. Many ancient Chinese scripts have been lost or destroyed in China's turbulent history, but a set of instructions for pregnant women written by a Chinese gynaecologist¹ around AD 493-572 survive. Their translation makes for historically fascinating reading as it was believed that the mother's emotions, lifestyle habits and diet could directly affect her growing foetus. From the fourth month onward, the foetus systematically received each of the Five Elements – water, fire, metal, wood and earth – which emphasises the fundamental belief within Chinese medicine of our intricate connection to the natural world. At each stage of receipt of a particular element the ancient set of instructions advises the pregnant lady how she can best support her growing foetus, whether that be by eating non-glutinous rice (thus nourishing the blood), living in the most interior part of the house (to protect her Qi), going out in the morning to breathe in the rays of the sun (to take in the warming Yang which, in turn, boosts Qi), or watching dogs and horses run (to foster the development of muscular strength and movement).

Although modern day acupuncturists are highly unlikely to suggest you watch horses or dogs run, they will often suggest foods to nourish blood, or certain lifestyle activities to help maintain the health both of you and your baby.

Heartburn is a common problem which often starts in this second trimester and may range from a mild annoyance to quite severe discomfort. Rebecca was 26 weeks pregnant when she started acupuncture treatment for heartburn. She was eating smaller meals but still having some fried foods and daily coffee; she was taking antacid medicine almost 2 hourly and only getting short-term relief. I suggested she avoid fried foods, coffee and spicy food and I needled points on her feet and wrists and sent her home with tiny press needles to wear on her foot points overnight (when there are no shoes to aggravate the needles). A week later she reported feeling much better and had reduced her medicine to 4-6 hourly; the week after that, she was taking antacid medicine only before bed, and, as long as she wore the press needles at night, was getting mild symptoms only after her evening meal.

¹ Dr Xu Zi Cai

Given the increasing weight of the growing baby, changes in the mother's centre of gravity which alters posture and the 'loosening' effects that progesterone and relaxin have on the ligaments of the body, it is hardly surprising that most pregnant women experience musculoskeletal discomfort at some stage of pregnancy. This may affect the ribs, back, pelvis or hips and it may range from a dull discomfort through to the more severe type of pain which can be experienced with sciatica. Western medicine can offer physiotherapy, possibly pain killers (which, naturally, most pregnant women are reluctant to take) and advice on specific exercises and rest. Acupuncture treatment of these pains can be one of the most immediate and successful treatments I have witnessed. Take for instance Mary, who wrote after her treatment "Having started to suffer with sciatica halfway through my pregnancy, I was keen to give acupuncture a try ... I was astounded by how quickly and effectively it worked ... the following day, it was as if I'd never had the problem and it's remained that way for the rest of my pregnancy ..." Or Sarah who wrote "I was signed off work at 14 weeks as I could hardly walk, bend or sit straight in a chair ... the pain was unbearable ... (and) at times I just couldn't move off the spot as I couldn't put any pressure on the left leg at all. (After the acupuncture treatment) within 3 days I could feel improvement and my back continued to get better as the days/weeks went on and even better with every treatment ..." I never fail to marvel at the power of acupuncture when I see a woman responding so positively to treatment. I often use additional techniques such as moxibustion² or cupping³ which enhance the acupuncture treatment, and I regularly send ladies home with tiny press needles which can help maintain the positive effects of treatment until the next appointment. I will also teach some acupressure points if appropriate so that the woman or her partner can press on these when necessary – I've found this particularly useful when helping ladies with night time leg cramps or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Insomnia can occur at any stage in pregnancy, but often in this second trimester it can become more prevalent as moving about in bed starts to become a little less easy, and there is increasing pressure on the bladder. Western medicine offers limited good advice on relaxation and bedtime routine; Chinese medicine, through its process of questioning, pulse taking and tongue examination, recognises different patterns of imbalance and treats accordingly. Two ladies seeking help with insomnia may have quite different treatments – one may be diagnosed, for example, as blood deficient and the other with liver heat. Alongside this treatment, dietary considerations are important such as avoiding the stimulant caffeine, plus adding specific foods which may help to balance the particular pattern, for example dark leafy greens and beetroot to help nourish blood deficiency.

Finally, a few rarely discussed discomforts, mostly because women tend to be embarrassed at mentioning them, but which can be eased greatly with acupuncture. Haemorrhoids, vulval varicosities and varicose veins are enlarged/congested veins around the rectum, vulva/vagina and in the legs respectively. Haemorrhoids may often occur as a result of constipation, and all conditions are influenced by the pressure of the growing uterus, the increased blood supply within the body and the softening effect of progesterone on the blood vessels. Chinese medicine sees these conditions as being influenced by the energy (Qi) of the Spleen, thus treatment is directed at

² A stick of the herb Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) which is lit like a cigar and held over certain acupuncture points

³ An ancient technique used to stimulate Qi and blood flow. A vacuum is created within 1 or more glass or bamboo cups and placed onto the skin for approximately 10 minutes. Plastic cups may also be used.

nourishing Spleen Qi. Although a complete cure may not be affected, acupuncture can greatly minimize the symptoms of discomfort and heaviness and, in the case of haemorrhoids, help relieve the aggravating itching which is so often present. Again, alterations to diet and lifestyle will often be suggested in order to support the acupuncture treatment.

Acupuncture treatment is a gentle, safe, 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 third trimester and preparation for labour ...

www.woottonchinesemedicine.co.uk