



KEEP THE DOCTOR AWAY

Feature

A Holistic Approach to Fertility

A Holistic Approach to Fertility, by Beth Heller, co-author of Fully Fertile: A Holistic 12 Week Plan for Optimal Fertility.

In this article:

- Physical, emotional and spiritual tips to increase fertility.
- How traditional treatments can boost fertility.
- Studies that support the holistic approach to fertility.

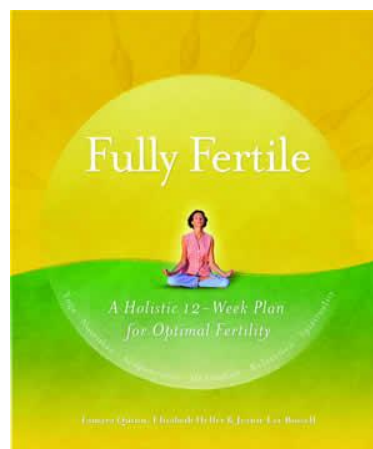
As any woman in her late thirties knows, the odds of getting pregnant as she grows older are lower than in younger women. And when she is ready to have a child and has a problem conceiving it can be a very stressful time.

Medical approaches to treating infertility are very effective for many but not all women. Increasingly for some women due to choice, availability, or the associated costs medical intervention is not a realistic option.

Holistic fertility however offers an entirely different approach, one in which women actively participate making lifestyle changes and using traditional treatments which have been shown to help women become pregnant. It combines working with traditional approaches from yoga, oriental medicine as well as nutrition and the focus is upon achieving balance within the whole body and mind, to prepare for conception.

More and more women today are turning to holistic techniques to increase their odds of conception and importantly to cope with the stresses of trying to conceive. Increasingly there is evidence of the efficacy of holistic approaches and some medical doctors are recommending women introduce yoga, relaxation, nutrition into their fertility treatment plans, as well as recommending women try acupuncture, either in addition to assisted reproduction or alone.

Taking a holistic approach to improving fertility is the focus of a new book *Fully Fertile: A Holistic 12 Week Plan for Optimal Fertility*. The book outlines a holistic fertility plan which can be effective on its own or as a support for medical fertility treatment. Authors Tami Quinn, Beth Heller (also founders of a holistic fertility centre, Pulling Down the Moon) and licensed acupuncturist Jeanine Lee Bussell, bring to light an 'integrative' model for healing that was first outlined thousands of years ago in ancient yogic texts. The model posits that we have five bodies that together make up our whole being: a physical body made of flesh and blood, an energy body alive with life-energy (called "prana" in yoga and "qi" in Oriental Medicine), a body made up of our thoughts and emotions, a body of wisdom and intuition, and a body that is made of pure joy. These bodies are called koshas and they fit together in a way that's analogous to lampshades around a light bulb. As we create greater awareness and "clear away" blockages in each of the shades, our inner light becomes brighter, resulting in a healthier, more fulfilling and peaceful existence.



The Fully Fertile approach to holistic fertility is divided into three main sections. It begins with physical practices like yoga, nutrition and acupuncture that help to calm, nourish and detoxify the physical body in preparation for conception. The second section focuses on what the authors call “strengthening the letting go muscle”! and tackling the mental-emotional issues of the fertility process. The final section of the book explores the spiritual crises that women experiences when they’re trying to conceive. The authors’ approach, while based on traditional healing is supported by an increasing body of clinical research.

Widespread clinical data supports the belief that women using Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) have levels of stress and anxiety that are higher than their fertile counterparts. Infertility, which affects nearly one in eight couples of childbearing age world-wide, is first and foremost an incredibly stressful experience.

In a 1993 study published in Fertility and Sterility, researcher Dr. Alice Domar found that women undergoing In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) had depression and anxiety levels equal to women with cancer and AIDS. While it is yet unclear whether stress causes infertility, it is clear that infertility causes stress – marital, financial and personal. Stress in turn is associated with behaviors that are detrimental to fertility including alcohol consumption, smoking, poor sleep and overweight/stress eating. It stands to reason that interventions that decrease stress would increase a woman’s chances conceptions, and in fact that appears to be the case. Subsequent studies by Dr. Domar showed that women who participated in mind-body interventions that included yoga, meditation and visualization, and cognitive and behavioral therapy had higher pregnancy rates than control subjects.

The Fully Fertile programme makes these mind-body-spirit techniques available to women everywhere. It’s a do-it-yourself guide to creating a holistic fertility regimen of one’s own or with other women in the community.

A Holistic Approach to Fertility: Yoga

The stretching and poses that most of us recognize as “yoga” is actually the tip of an enormous wealth of teaching first revealed by ancient sages many thousands of years ago. The yoga postures, called asana, were initially practiced by yogis in caves with the aim of making their bodies strong and supple enough to remain in seated meditation for extended periods of time. Along the way, however, the same yogis began to notice the health benefits of practicing different poses and a new practice of yoga chikitsa, or yoga therapeutics, evolved.

Yoga poses do their work by stretching muscles and realigning the body. In the case of fertility, yoga poses that stretch and open tight pelvic musculature increase blood flow into the pelvic region. And better blood flow nourishes the ovaries and uterus.

In addition to the physical stimulation provided by yoga asana, much of yoga’s beneficial effect on fertility comes from the practice of deep, mindful breathing that is an integral part of any yoga regimen.

Yoga breathing practices serve to positively impact hormonal balance by decreasing levels of the “fight or flight” hormone cortisol, which is known to interfere with the proper functioning of the reproductive system.

A Holistic Approach to Fertility: Oriental Medicine

The practice of Oriental Medicine includes many modalities, the best-known of which are acupuncture, Chinese Herbal Therapy and exercises like T’ai Chi and Qi Gong. The goal of Oriental Medicine is to cultivate balance in body and mind. When the body is in balance, it functions well. Sleep is restful, our immune function is strong and we are relaxed in mind and spirit. In the context of Oriental Medicine, infertility is viewed as a symptom of imbalance.

Although it has been used for thousands of years to increase fertility in Eastern countries, Oriental Medicine crashed on the fertility scene in 2002 when a group of German researchers demonstrated that an acupuncture protocol designed to calm and increase blood flow to the uterus raised IVF success rates by 61% when administered before and after IVF embryo transfer. Suddenly, this ancient technique became a front-line treatment for women who were stressed-out and looking for any way they could improve their odds of having a baby. Acupuncture is the insertion of very fine needles into specific points on the body and is analogous to getting the kinks out of a garden hose to free the flow of water. The needles are placed at specific points along energy paths, called meridians, to bolster insufficient or dispel excess energy that is causing a root imbalance.

One of the biggest strengths of Oriental Medicine is that it treats each patient individually. A skilled practitioner uses a range of diagnostic tools including pulse diagnosis, tongue examination and extensive health history to determine an individual's specific pattern of disharmony. And treatment is as individual as the diagnosis. In this system, the same disease can require very different treatment plans. Beyond the study above, Oriental Medicine has been clinically proven to decrease miscarriage rates, improve the quality of the uterine lining and improve sperm quality. The use of Chinese herbs in the treatment of infertility can also be very helpful when a woman is trying to conceive, but herbal therapy is not recommended during medical fertility cycles and should only be administered by a skilled Oriental Medicine practitioner.

A Holistic Approach to Fertility: Nutrition

According to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, about 12% of infertility cases are due to over- or underweight, and of these, nearly 75% would resolve with dietary intervention. In the recent book *The Fertility Diet*, Harvard researcher Jorge Chavarro shares data from the Nurses' Study II which found higher consumption of monounsaturated rather than trans fats, vegetable rather than animal protein sources, low glycemic carbohydrates, high fat dairy, multivitamins, and iron from plants and supplements to be associated with lower rates of ovulatory infertility. Like yoga and Oriental Medicine, fertility nutrition is not a one-size-fits-all program. The Fully Fertile programme integrates nutrition guidelines from modern Western sources with the ancient teachings of yoga and Oriental Medicine.

A Holistic Approach to Fertility: Mind-Body Practices

Tami Quinn, co-founder of Pulling Down the Moon holistic fertility centre and co-author of *Fully Fertile*, acknowledges that perhaps the most important part of any holistic fertility programme (and life, for that matter) is learning to cope with the constant anxiety and stress that comes with the territory. That's why an entire section of *Fully Fertile* is dedicated to coping with the stresses of the fertility process.

According to Quinn, "I was a classic Type A business woman when I ran into my own infertility issues. I'd always assumed that if I worked hard enough, I could achieve anything I set my mind to. It was life changing to recognize that I couldn't put the sperm and the egg together and make them stick. I had to learn to let go."

"We really stress that in addition to adopting practices like yoga and good nutrition, there are definitely things that women will need to give up," Quinn adds. "Women can be proactive in the process, hire the best doctors, read every last word on the subject but no matter how hard they work they cannot predict when that baby will come."

When a woman's belief of complete control over her destiny starts to falter, she begins to feel broken – first physically and then mentally and spiritually. Patterns of negative thoughts harden into self-defeating mantras of "I'm never going to get pregnant." *Fully Fertile's* takes a closer look at how to let go – through deeper yoga techniques of meditation, ritual and prayer which allow a woman to connect with something greater than her self and create healing through recognizing her own innate fertility.

A Holistic Approach to Fertility: Community

Mary Williams, a 38 year old woman who began her fertility journey a year ago, joined a pilot holistic fertility book club based on *Fully Fertile: A Holistic 12 Week Plan for Optimal Fertility*. The group met weekly to work through the 12 week programme.

Mary admits that the “secret sauce” of a holistic fertility programme may not actually reside in any one thing an individual will do. At the holistic fertility centre, Pulling Down the Moon (www.pullingdownthemoon.com) the energy of the group (called sangha in yoga teachings) has been recognized as a powerful healing tool. Members of the Fully Fertile pilot group can attest to this. All of the women who participated in the pilot still keep in touch. Four are pregnant and those who have not yet conceived feel confident that they will find the family they're meant to have.

One of those now pregnant is Mary Williams, despite the bleak odds she received of a less than 1% chance of conceiving without assisted reproductive technologies. Mary was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, a hormonal condition characterized by irregular periods and associated with infertility, combined with scarring in one of her fallopian tubes and abnormalities in her husband's sperm. Yet, Mary conceived without medical intervention and credits the Fully Fertile programme and her group members.

“The honesty and openness that developed allowed each of us to feel safe, supported and share from our hearts the challenges, obstacles and hopelessness we felt. Through the Fully Fertile programme, working with other women in the same position, I learned so much about myself, which created a healthy balance in mind, body and soul. I went into this expecting to find hope for PCOS and infertility but what I found was much greater: friendship, support, understanding and a deep sense of caring for me as a woman, with or without a child. I found the coping skills to achieve balance in mind, body and soul.”

Fully Fertile: A Holistic 12 Week Plan for Optimal Fertility by Tamara Quinn, Elisabeth Heller M.S.(as pictured), and Jeanine Lee Bussell is available from Findhorn Press.