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Holistic therapies can be helpful in treatment of infertility: an Alternative Paths column

by [Brie Zeltner/The Plain Dealer](#)

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Quinn, 43, felt alone, scared and unsure of herself. So after her children were born — she had twins in 1997 — she decided to quit her corporate job and start helping women who were trying to get pregnant to relax. In 2002, she co-founded [Pulling Down the Moon](#), a holistic fertility center that offered mostly yoga and meditation. Acupuncture, nutrition and massage soon followed.

Quinn may have been slightly ahead of the curve when she opened her centers in the Chicago and Washington areas, but it's not surprising that the formula works or that stressed-out couples want the help.

Growing evidence shows that treatments such as acupuncture, massage and yoga have a place in the [treatment of infertility](#), increasing the likelihood of pregnancy and reducing the overall stress and anxiety associated with the process so that couples can stick with treatment.

Successful conventional medical treatment for infertility often depends on repeated attempts at kick-starting ovulation with drugs, in-vitro fertilization (IVF) or embryo implantation. This takes time, and the possibility of repeated failures puts many couples through unhealthy emotional peaks and valleys during treatment.

Infertility treatment can also be expensive, depending on how long it takes and what types of procedures are needed. While diagnosis and treatment of infertility are usually covered by insurance, procedures to help a couple conceive usually are not.

Most infertility centers offer psychological counseling, but many of these couples look outside the doctor's office for additional help.

A study of about 130 infertility patients at a clinic outside Columbus recently showed that about two-thirds said they used some form of alternative therapy during their treatment. The study, published online in July in the Journal of Reproductive Medicine, was conducted by Ohio State University College of Medicine obstetrician Jonathan Schaffir and his colleagues.

The most commonly cited therapies were prayer (34 percent), dietary changes (22 percent) and relaxation techniques (21 percent). Respondents also said they tried herbal remedies (14 percent) and acupuncture (12 percent). Several other methods not traditionally considered complementary or alternative medical treatments were also mentioned, including a change in sexual practice -- which did not include increasing frequency of sex -- (13 percent), use of fertility accessories like charms (6 percent) and a change from briefs to boxers in male partners (12 percent).

The results are no surprise to Dr. William Hurd, director of the division of reproductive endocrinology at University Hospitals MacDonal Women's Hospital.

Hurd says infertility treatments tend to be very stressful for patients, "so we encourage them to think about that, pace themselves, and look for ways to lower the stress while they're going through medical therapy."

A study published online in the journal Fertility and Sterility in July showed that stress was the primary reason couples failed to complete a third cycle of in-vitro fertilization treatment.

Relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation and moderate exercise can be very helpful, Hurd said.

Quinn and her business partner started offering acupuncture about seven months after opening their first Chicago clinic (they now have four locations in Chicago and one in Washington, D.C.) when studies began to show that there was a fertility benefit to patients who used the treatment along with their conventional medical care. Now many infertility clinics refer their patients to acupuncturists, and patients often seek out the treatment on their own if it is not offered.

UH offers acupuncture to its patients at its Chagrin Highlands Health Center.

Many of the patients surveyed by OSU's Schaffir said they had tried dietary changes to help them get pregnant. While the changes they mentioned -- things like eating yams and pomegranates -- probably have no effect, there is one dietary change that can have a big effect on fertility.

Studies have shown that obesity can reduce fertility in women, and insulin resistance, an underlying factor in obesity, can cause polycystic ovary syndrome, a hormonal disorder that causes irregular menstrual periods and infrequent or irregular ovulation. Obesity may also reduce fertility in men. Quinn says that she often gets referrals from physicians who have patients who weigh too much to start IVF therapy.

Weighing too little can be just as damaging to fertility.

Quinn works with a nutrition counselor to help these patients change their diet and exercise habits.

Some of the other methods the OSU respondents mentioned have been studied little, if at all. Schaffir and Hurd caution against taking herbs while trying to become pregnant, especially without a physician's knowledge.

"If you're doing something, you want to make sure that it's safe, not just safe for you but that it's safe in pregnancy, because you might be in early pregnancy when you're doing this," Hurd says.

Other methods, like using charms and trying different sexual positions, probably won't help at all and may just make your sex life more stressful, Schaffir says.

Which is anything but helpful.

But what about the methods that haven't been studied well yet, like yoga, meditation, reflexology or even prayer?

"If it doesn't hurt to try it, and it helps you emotionally, then it helps as far as we're concerned," says Hurd.

Schaffir agrees.

"The whole process of getting pregnant is often beyond one's control, and anything that gives couples a sense that they have some control over it, and isn't otherwise harmful, I think is just fine."

Quinn believes that more scientific study of the subject will make some of these questions clearer in the future, and encourages women to keep talking to their physicians in the meantime.