

## **PREPARING FOR IVF** By Jo George

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### **Introduction**

**Improving your general health and gametes can in some cases be a lengthy process. Treatment with Chinese Medicine might span 4 - 6 months, compared to the 4 - 6 weeks of an IVF treatment cycle. Putting the building blocks in place before your IVF schedule is wise, but sometimes not possible.**

**Getting the cycle into balance is important to the success of the IVF treatment. Issues such as PMS, fibroids, PCOS, painful periods require treatment. Equally low sperm count; motility, or high abnormal sperm are all signs of imbalance that can be addressed with acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, and dietary/lifestyle adjustments.**

**There's a great deal you can do to enhance your IVF treatment, minimise the negative effects of the drugs and help your body to recover afterwards. Remember nutrition and lifestyle changes also apply to the male and may help to improve sperm health in the lead up to IVF.**

**There is a dizzying amount of information given to prospective parents – what they should eat, what they shouldn't eat, which pills they should swallow, which they should not, and which activities to do, or not do. Here I will look at the basics.**

## **Nutritional Preparation**

Generally many naturopaths advocate diets not only of wholesome fresh food but also organic fresh food. Which means food that hasn't been exposed to fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics or hormones. IVF experts are now finding just how important it is that embryos are not exposed to toxic chemicals of any sort at any level. Therefore avoiding pesticides, chemicals and fumes appears to have a sound basis.

## **Weight**

Whilst restriction of calories has an immediate effect on the pituitary hormones acting on the ovary, alarmingly at only 10% below the norm body weight can cause reduced ovulation. Conversely overweight women can also have problems conceiving, which is sometimes related to polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). If you have 4-6 weeks, try to detox. This helps to clean toxins from the body and helps get rid of excess weight. This can also be useful in between cycles.

## **Caffeine**

A large study carried out by the Yale medical School found that that risk of infertility (which they defined as not being able to conceive after 12 months) was 55% higher for women drinking just 1 cup of coffee per day, 100% higher for women drinking 1.5-3 cups per day and 176% higher for more than 3 cups per day, and this was backed up by a study 5 years later in Europe which found that caffeine intake slowed the rate of conception in women. Additionally there is evidence that coffee drinking in men and women increases miscarriage rates and has a negative affect on foetal growth during pregnancy.

## **Alcohol**

It seems from the current evidence found for and against restricting all alcohol in the diet, and most professional working in the field of fertility will advise against too much alcohol consumption. Restricting all alcohol intake however doesn't seem justified given the evidence.

## **Fluid Intake**

Drinking enough fluid is part of a healthy diet – every system in the body depends on it. Nourishing fluid around the egg in the follicle, the fluid in the fallopian tubes and the fluid levels in the endometrium as it prepares to sustain the fetus are all very important. In men good levels of fluids are needed to nourish the sperm, and moisture levels. A daily intake of 8 glasses of water daily that does not contain caffeine, sugar, salt or any thing else is advised.

Another reason to ensure good water intake is the effect it has on blood circulation. When the body is dehydrated the blood becomes thicker and circulation in the far reaches the tiniest capillaries is retarded. In Chinese medicine stagnation of blood can cause all kinds of gynecological conditions that inhibit fertility.

## **Nutritional Supplements**

The British Association for the promotion of preconception care, called Foresight, has for many years dispensed information about diet and lifestyle to prospective parents. They have sponsored research, which convincingly supports a well balanced diet, and clean of junk food, or added chemicals, and the optimum intake of many vitamins and minerals:

- A good quality multi-vitamin and mineral supplement will help your body cope with the demands of IVF. These are namely Vitamin C and E, which enriches the fluid which surrounds and nourishes your eggs. Zinc, which is essential for hormone production. Magnesium and vitamin A, which aid egg production. Selenium and magnesium to improve fertilisation rates. Iron and Co-enzyme Q10, to enrich the womb lining. Vitamins C, E and zinc also help you to repair quickly after the egg retrieval, ready to receive the incoming embryos and B complex will help your body cope with stress.
- Essential fatty acids, the “good fats” are vitally important for hormone balance and general/ovarian health in the period leading up to and during IVF, and pregnancy. One tablespoon of organic flax seed oil should provide the daily recommend dose. Keep refrigerated, and use on salads and savory foods. Do not cook with it.
- Too little protein in your diet can result in a reduced number of eggs. Make sure you have an adequate daily supply of protein (around 60 mg). The best quality protein foods in terms of amino acid balance are eggs, soya, meat, fish, beans, lentils, and quinoa. Avoid too many dairy products and always eat organic meat.

## **Mental & Emotional Preparation**

### **Stress**

Feeling relaxed and unstressed favours conception. A study of women undergoing IVF showed that those who exhibited lower levels of measurable physiological stress had a higher chance of success. Specialists at Harvard medical School have also pointed out that stress along with depression has been indicated in ovulation irregularities, and in men emotional stress can be associated with abnormal sperm development.

Depression among infertile women is found to be just as severe as the depression experienced by those facing life threatening diseases such as cancer, heart disease and AIDS. The cruel irony is that this depression can then contribute further to the infertility. Regular exercise, and acupuncture are useful strategies and can do a lot to relieve stress and depression along with some specific tips for the IVF process below-

- Find relaxation techniques that suit you, and best fits into your life easily. Try meditation, Qi gong, yoga and Tai chi. You may also benefit by investing in some relaxation CD's/ tapes.
- Take time out with your partner and plan some nice things to do that you both enjoy. Its ok to occasionally stop thinking and worrying and spend time just enjoying being together. Give each other the support needed to get through this and be aware that you want to still have a good relationship at the end of it. Keep talking.
- The IVF procedures, appointment etc are demanding, do not underestimate this. Plan ahead so that you have time to recover from each procedure, and make sure you have made the source in your life for it.
- Positive Visualization is useful. During each stage of treatment, visualize what is happening in your body – the follicles growing, the eggs maturing, the womb lining thickening, the embryos implanting.

## **Physical Preparation**

- **Weekly acupuncture when you start your programme will help to improve the flow of blood and energy to your reproductive organs, balance the body, build up the womb lining, grow follicles and help with implantation.**
  - **Don't smoke and avoid smoky atmospheres, as cigarette smoke affects the lining of the womb.**
  - **Avoid strenuous aerobic exercise, and any heavy lifting. Gentle exercise such as Qi gong, Tai Qi, walking and yoga is fine, as your hormonal system is shut down to prepare for IVF, your body needs necessary rest.**
  - **Avoid Sun bathing, hot tubs, jacuzzi's, and hot baths, which are too stimulating.**
  - **Keep your lower back and abdomen warm, particularly leading up to egg collection and between egg collection and transfer. Do not use heat after transfer.**
  - **Limit the amount of time spent sitting at a desk / computer as this restricts blood flow. Rest and have early nights.**
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