

## **Unexplained Infertility**

**By Jo George**

Unexplained infertility is a particularly challenging diagnosis, a diagnosis doctors apply to explain why conception isn't occurring. Infertility is defined as the inability to produce offspring in a woman who has been trying for two years, who has a normal sex life and, of course, whose partner has normal reproductive function. Chinese medicine is particularly effective in treating this otherwise devastating diagnosis.

Infertility is frequently treated in China according to the four phases of the menstrual cycle, the postmenstrual, the period, inter menstrual and pre menstrual phases. Inter menstrual and pre menstrual phase defects (Luteal phase) may be "within the normal range according to hormone essays, yet below optimum to prevent conception. Many cases of "unexplained infertility" involve situations where hormones essays are considered normal, yet the lining of the uterus fails to respond to the hormone progesterone, which dominates the luteal phase. When the endometrium is plump, progesterone causes a cascade of events causing the primed endometrium to initiate proteins and enzymes that create an ideal environment for the fertilized embryo to adhere and implant to.

However the endometrium has to be considered more closely, as when the menstrual blood is abnormal in amount, colour, and consistency; it usually indicates a problem within the uterine lining. If the blood flow is light, dizziness, pale blood, delayed cycle this can suggest a deficiency of blood or thin endometrium, therefore by tonifying the blood during the follicular phase with an herbal formula this helps to plump up the endometrium. As a result the blood flow usually becomes heavier and the endometrium thicker. On the other hand if the menstrual blood is scant in amount but very dark in colour with clots and accompanied by stabbing pain and irritability, this may mean that the blood supply to the endometrium is obstructed and not working efficiently which can impede the implantation of the fertilized ovum. The use an herbal formula is necessary to resolve the impeded blood which Chinese medicine call blood stasis. If the blood stasis continues it may become severe and long standing stagnation of blood can give rise to ovarian cysts, or fibroids.

Another syndrome that may impede the blood supply to the uterus in Chinese medicine is called liver qi stagnation, which manifests with irregular periods, PMS symptoms, irritability and some pain, and small clots in the blood. In Chinese medicine we aim to free flow the qi again with herbs and acupuncture, however to address this syndrome entirely stress levels have to be managed (see stress and fertility article).

Other pattern can also occur at the very end of the luteal phase or just before the period when we often symptoms of spleen qi deficiency or kidney yang deficiency. Symptoms may include the temperature falling early, along with low back pain, loose stools, and lack of appetite, and a scanty period. The person may also feel cold generally, especially the feet, and may also wake up at night to urinate. This is a key indication that kidney yang is deficient and cannot adequately support a 14 day luteal phase. By using diet and an herbal formula and heating moxibustion with the addition of acupuncture it is usual for the cycle to lengthen, signs of kidney yang deficiency to diminish, and the temperature to remain buoyant during the Luteal phase.

Another common condition in Chinese medicine causing infertility is known as a "cold uterus" (which is very common in cold and damp countries). In western scientific approach this simple means that the uterus has not responding well to the warming

effects of progesterone in the second half of the cycle. As a result the blood vessels that supply the endometrium constrict, which causes a lack of blood circulation to the endometrium necessary for implantation. Often a combination of kidney yang deficiency (warmth) and blood stasis are present as the blood congeals without warmth. The symptoms that may accompany this disharmony include premenstrual low back pain; cramps relieved by heat, and clotted menstrual blood. By Prescribing a formula consisting of warming and invigorating herbs, and attending to the diet results are usually favourable.

Phlegm/dampness is often another cause of the uterus being blocked and a cause of the inability to conceive. Symptoms such as irregular periods, delayed cycle, vaginal discharge, and adhesions and being over weight are often indications of this syndrome. In order to clear the phlegm from the uterus herbal formulae and dietary changes are necessary, as in Chinese medicine this condition can often lead to ovarian cysts and blocked fallopian tubes.

Lastly is also extremely important in Chinese medicine and unexplained infertility to look at the timing of menstruation and whether it is balanced. For example is the cycle regular? Does it have a certain pattern? Or no pattern at all? Is it shorter or longer than average? If shorter than 26 days, the focus of the treatment is to lengthen it. If the first phase (before ovulation) is shorter than ten days we aim to lengthen it. Simply attending to the timing of the cycle can attend to the underlying imbalances causing sub normal fertility.