

CORRESPONDENCE

Content

Treating Infertility by Chinese Herbs

TREATING INFERTILITY BY CHINESE HERBS

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 8-10% of couples experience some form of infertility problem. On a worldwide scale, this means that 50-80 million people suffer from infertility. However, the incidence of infertility may vary from region to region¹.

Recent research has brought good news for infertile couples inasmuch as there are new treatment strategies, such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and microinsemination. The bad news, however, is that this progress is restricted mainly to treatment of symptoms. There has been little gain in prevention and clarification of the underlying causes¹.

This article focuses on the different herbs used in the treatment of female infertility but there are also herbs which are used in the treatment of male infertility like a published article in which combination of Chinese herbs (Zhuanyindan ZYD, a self-made Chinese herbal preparation) and hormone could lower the Nitric oxide level in semen and improve the quality of sperm².

No individual herb is considered especially useful for promoting fertility. Rather, more than 150 different herbs, usually given in complex formulas comprised of 15 or more ingredients, are used in the treatment of

infertility with the purpose of correcting a functional or organic problem that caused infertility.

Complementary therapists take a more holistic view of infertility treatment than do allopathic health professionals. Herbs which encourage pregnancy are characterized by their ability to³:

- a. nourish and tonify the uterus
- b. nourish the entire body
- c. relax the nervous system
- d. establish and balance normal hormonal function
- e. balance sexual desire

CHINESE HERBS

Here are a few herbs, listed in order of importance, that are often recommended by naturopathic doctors and herbalists to help restore female fertility.

- **Chaste tree berry**
(Vitex agnus-castus)

This herb stimulates the release of luteinizing hormone (LH) from the pituitary gland in the brain. This, in turn, promotes ovulation. Chaste tree berry may restore normal periods in women with amenorrhea.

- **Dong quai**
(Angelica sinensis)

Widely used for female complaints, including menstrual irregularities and infertility,

dong quai can tone a weak uterus by promoting metabolism within the organ⁴, regulating hormonal control and improving the rhythm of the menstrual cycle⁵.

- **Red clover blossoms**
(*Trifolium pratense*)

These beautiful little flowers are categorized in many herbals as fertility promoters. Chemical analysis shows that the herb is rich in coumestans and isoflavones, estrogenlike compounds that may promote fertility, particularly in women who are deficient in estrogen⁶.

- **Licorice**
(*Glycyrrhiza glabra*)

This plant contains hormonally active compounds categorized as saponins⁷. A Japanese study found licorice-based medicines improved menstruation in women with infrequent periods. The study also found that licorice helped women with elevated testosterone and low estrogen levels, as commonly occurs in polycystic ovary disease⁸.

- **Siberian ginseng**
(*Eleutherococcus senticosus*)

This and other tonic botanicals can improve fertility by enhancing overall health and vitality. Siberian ginseng also acts on the brain to promote regulation of reproductive hormones.⁹

- **Black cohosh**
(*Cimicifuga racemosa*)

Like chaste tree berry, black cohosh enhances pituitary secretion of luteinizing hormone with subsequent ovarian stimulation¹⁰. It contains isoflavone constituents, which can bind to estrogen receptors in the body¹¹.

The growing popularity of traditional Chinese medicine used alone or in combination with Western medicine highlights the need to examine the pros and cons of both Western and traditional Chinese medicine approaches¹².

As there are hardly few studies documented on these herbs used in the management of infertility. It is easy to say "prevention is better than cure", but the difficulty with infertility is that the available knowledge on pathogenesis is very poor. So we conclude that further studies should be

conducted to determine the efficacy and safety of these herbs in the management of infertility.

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