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FILE: ■ Infertility

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RE: Herbs for Infertility – Improving the Odds for Conception

Wetherbee K. Infertility: improving the odds. *Herbs for Health*. December 2004:1–7.

Approximately 7% of all married couples, or 2.1 million, are infertile.¹ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines a couple as infertile if they have tried to conceive for 12 months without success. In couples where the woman is 40 years old, the rate of infertility rises to more than 50%. Male infertility occurs in nearly half of couples who cannot get pregnant. This article discusses possible causes for the high rate of infertility and provides a range of herbal and nutritional strategies that may help couples conceive.

Women's menstrual cycles are regulated by the interplay of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. If estrogen is too high then women may have difficulty ovulating and getting pregnant. Estrogen also exists in men, and if it is elevated in men it can decrease sperm production. Pesticides and plastics are two examples of chemicals that can mimic estrogen in the body, and lead to fertility problems, according to the William Wong, Ph.D., a Texas naturopathic doctor, writer, and lecturer.

Decreasing exposure to synthetic chemicals is part of an overall strategy to increase fertility. Eating organic, nutrient-dense whole foods is recommended. According to the author, "Organically grown foods should be at the heart of your fertility-enhancing menu." Organic foods, which use less synthetic pesticides and have higher nutritional content than conventionally-grown foods, can decrease the body's exposure to these chemicals. Non-organic dairy and meat products can contain high amounts of pesticides and hormones. Additionally, soy (*Glycine max*) and soy products are rich sources of estrogen-like chemicals, called isoflavones. Moderating the amount of soy eaten may also help.

Herbs that may increase fertility include vitex (*Vitex agnus-castus*), Pycnogenol® (Horphag Research; Geneva, Switzerland; from *Pinus maritima*), damiana (*Turnera diffusa*), and maca (*Lepidium meyenii*). Vitex can increase progesterone in the second half of the cycle, which helps promote ovulation. Two studies have shown that vitex dramatically increases pregnancy rates. Pycnogenol helps with male infertility. Men who took 200 mg Pycnogenol

for 90 days had a 38% improvement in sperm "quality and function." Damiana is reported to increase circulation and modulate pH in the testes in favor of sperm development, according to Majid Ali, a California-based herbalist and acupuncturist. Maca is used in both men and women. Dr. Wong reports that it can increase libido, decrease estrogen, and increase testosterone.

Some nutritional supplements increase fertility. Zinc (66 mg/day) and folic acid (5 mg/day) increased sperm count by 74% after 26 weeks of supplementation. While vitamin C (1,000 mg/day) increased sperm counts by 140% in another study; however, high doses of vitamin C can decrease fertility in women by reducing cervical fluid production. Another study in which men received 400 mg/day vitamin E and 225 microgram/day selenium, "an improvement in sperm motility" was detected.

An inability to conceive is a stressful and heart-breaking reality for many couples. These strategies represent alternatives to costly procedures such as in vitro fertilization or intrauterine insemination. Additional research is needed to understand which natural treatments work best for specific types of infertility.

—John Neustadt, ND4

Reference

¹Abma J, Chandra A, Mosher W, Peterson L, Piccinino L. Fertility, family planning and women's health: new data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth. *Vital Health Stat.* May 1997;23(19).

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