

Conception Special

# The Road Less Travelled

**Alternative methods are gaining in popularity when it comes to baby making. Hana Schoon explores three.**

In the old days, children popped out like bunnies one after another; and having problems conceiving were rarely heard of. But these days, you read and hear about it everywhere. Thing is, making babies should come as naturally as the birds and the bees. However, as with most things in life, they don't always pan out this way – and trying for a baby can sometimes be a painful process that drags on for years without seeing any results.

When it comes to infertility, the reasons are many. A stressful lifestyle is often the culprit, says Dr Choo Wan Ling, consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist at

the Pacific Specialist Practice. "A lot of focus is on our career and the lifestyle we want to lead. More couples are delaying childbearing till later so as to focus on their careers and enjoying the couplehood and carefree lifestyle without children. We know that fertility rate definitely reduces with age. The age for maximum fertility is 20-24. Thereafter the fertility rate remains fairly constant till the 30s. Between 30-35, the fertility rate drops by 10-15 percent. From 36-39 years of age, it drops further to 25-50 percent. After 40, it drops by 50-90 per cent."

With infertility on the rise,



# egg®



many couples are turning to holistic practices and alternative medicine. The various healing systems have similar approaches – the body is treated as a whole, and there is strong emphasis on the mind-body connection – in short, you are how you feel. For example, if one partner does not want a baby, the body reacts accordingly to reject fertilisation efforts.

### Reiki

Reiki is all about energy flow, renewing your energy and bringing your body back into a state of balance. The beauty of Reiki is that you learn to realign your body's energy flow by treating yourself with your own hands, thus allowing your body to heal itself, says Elaine Grundy, Reiki master and life coach. The mother of two also credits Reiki for helping her through both pregnancies – she went through two caesareans

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and healed quickly without painkillers.

The Japanese energy therapy means 'Universal Life Force', and works by harmonising tension and stress, and removing any blockages in a person's energy field. A person treated with Reiki will feel anything from a subtle sensation right up to a heated buzzing one. Reiki helps one to strike that inner balance, helping ease infertility caused by external factors like stress, or negative emotions like fear and anxiety. It also helps women undergoing IVF to develop a greater sense of calm and peace, rendering them more receptive to the treatment. Elaine relates how a lady came to her in the midst of IVF treatment. She had been trying to get pregnant for about five years and doctors could not find anything physically wrong with the couple. Reiki helped immensely with her stress level, and while waiting, she conceived and went on to deliver a healthy baby boy.

Besides Reiki, there are also a combination of factors at play, like being in the right state of mind, eating the right foods and drinking quality water, attests entrepreneur and Reiki promoter Jacqueline Seow, the proud grandmother to twins – which she attributes to Reiki, together with an alkaline-rich diet and pure water. She says, "Reiki cannot make a woman pregnant, but practicing it everyday can help to bring your body back into a balanced state where the eggs can be fertilised. It is the body's intelligence that heals itself."

### Hilot

Contrary to popular belief, Hilot is more than just a healing massage. In its entirety, Hilot is a traditional healing system hailing from the Philippines, and draws many parallels to traditional Chinese medicine. Both employ a holistic approach to the body and its ailments, explains Fred Evard, Hilot practitioner and founder of Ni Tien Martial Arts.

There are three main things to note, says Fred "Maintain a blood alkaline level of around pH7; keep a good posture; learn to relax and breathe properly."

A poor diet, stress and the lack of sleep are factors that contribute to increased acidity. The ideal alkaline level in Asians hovers around a pH level of seven, and this is beneficial to sperm survival - sperm can survive better in a more alkaline environment, and they are easily killed in an acidic one.

Knowing which foods have alkaline or acidic residual properties will help you along in maintaining better blood alkalinity, advises Fred. "Portion size is the key here - you can still have your acidic foods like meat and animal products (cheese, eggs and milk), while balancing them

up with alkaline ones like green vegetables and soy-based products like tofu." Also, drink at least two litres of water a day to flush out those toxins and clear your system.

When it comes to posture, our elders were right in stressing the importance of keeping a straight back. Over time, a hunched posture wrecks damage on your reproductive organs by compressing them, thus obstructing blood and oxygen circulation. When you hunch unconsciously through all your waking hours, your body learns and eventually settles into a 'hunch' position. So sit up straight!

Exercise helps in boosting overall relaxation, and movement is one of the key components in this. Fred recommends gentle breathing exercises like tai ji to get your energy flowing. Carolinda Asfhandy-Bieck, 33, home maker, started class from her second trimester onwards and credits the relaxation techniques for correcting her breathing and posture as well as calming her emotions, which made for a smooth pregnancy journey. After a long day at work, the flowing movements are just the remedy you need to gather your thoughts and instil a sense of calm!

## The Conception Roadmap

Conception takes time – the monthly odds of hitting the jackpot hovers around one to four. Generally, the younger the couple, the higher the chances of fertility. Age aside, it is important for both the sperm and egg to be of good quality; hence

both partners should take pride in their health. As a general rule of thumb, give yourselves about a year to get pregnant. "If you are above 35, or if you experience irregular menstrual cycles or a change in menstrual pattern,

it's a good idea to see your gynaecologist," says Dr Ann Tan, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, Women & Fetal Centre. If you have experienced gynaecological problems or undergone any surgery, a check up is a good idea too.

## Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been around for almost 5000 years. This is a holistic system of treating ailments by nailing the root causes, the internal biological balance is restored, says Physician Zhong Xi Ming, from Eu Yan Sang TCM Centre for Reproductive Health. In the past few years, she has observed a rising trend of patients being more receptive to TCM as part of their healing treatment programme.

TCM can be used as a standalone treatment programme or as a complement to western medical treatments to help speed up the recovery process. Treatment usually comprises herbs and acupuncture. Consultation involves an assessment of the patient's overall appearance and checking the tongue, taking the pulse and asking questions about the patient's general state of health, says Physician Chin Chew Seng, trainer for Eu Yan Sang's retail arm. Depending on the individual patient's needs, the physician will prescribe herbal formulas or acupuncture treatment, or a combination of both.

When it comes to acute or chronic reproductive disorders, acupuncture can help reduce stress hormones that interfere with ovulation and sperm production. It also helps to regulate hormones for a healthy reproductive system; increase blood flow to the uterus and improving the chances of a fertilised egg being implanted. Acupuncture is also useful for women with polycystic ovaries syndrome, regulating ovulation cycles and aiding conception. It also increases the chances of conception in women undergoing

IVF treatment.

Some commonly used herbs for reproductive disorders are Dang Gui (当归), Bai Shao (白芍), Dang Shen (党参) and Huang Qi (黄芪), which mainly help in regulating reproductive cycles, as well as in promoting better circulation in the body, says Physician Zhong.

Success stories are aplenty, and Physician Zhong shares three with us: There's Judy\*, 36 who has been trying for a second child after a miscarriage. Various gynaecological examinations have found no abnormality but after three months of both acupuncture and herbal medications, she successfully conceived and delivered.

Lilian\*, 37, had undergone in-vitro fertilisation treatment three times in January, March and June last year. All attempts were unsuccessful. "She came to me for first consultation in early September 2006, and told me that her husband had cancer of the lymphoid glands six years ago and that his sperms were kept frozen in the UK before

he went for chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She was treated with acupuncture once a week for two months before heading back to the UK for another IVF procedure in October. In early November 2006, she returned and informed us that she had conceived."

Judy\*, 36, has been trying to get pregnant again after having her first child two and a half years ago. "She had also gone for many thorough gynaecological examinations but found no abnormality. She had a miscarriage in the early stage of pregnancy recently. She was treated with both acupuncture and herbal medications. After nearly three months of treatment, she managed to conceive naturally and bring the baby to full term."

She also treats a fair number of male patients too and is happy to note that Lee\*, 34, married for the last seven years and trying for a child, has responded well to herbal medication for low sperm count. After four months, the happy man reported that his wife has successfully conceived. ■

\* Names have been changed.

## Possible Roadblocks

Both the sperm and egg are equally important in conception. When it comes to men, the sperm quantity or quality may be deficient, caused by lifestyle habits like smoking or drinking excessively, says Dr Choo Wan Ling. Medical conditions like diabetes mellitus or hypertension can also cause ejaculatory problems. Some hereditary or genetic conditions, like Klinefelter's syndrome, can affect sperm quality or count. Childhood infections like mumps can affect the testes and result in poor sperm count. "For women, problems can be caused by conditions like polycystic ovarian syndrome, which results in infrequent or lack of ovulation. Extreme weight gain or loss and stress can also affect our hormonal balance and hence affect ovulation. Tubal blockage can also occur from conditions like endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease."