

Women brave the needles in hopes of having children



LIPO CHING/STAFF PHOTOS

Acupuncturist Shasta Tierra checks the tongue of Tina Allen Gallo, 41, who is receiving treatments to increase her fertility at Way of Wellness in San Jose on Wednesday. Gallo says the treatments help her relax.

Although many female patients have used acupuncture to help ensure successful births, scientists still aren't sure how the procedure works, or if it is even effective



By Sandeep Ravindran

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Tina Allen Gallo lay on a couch in the dimly lit, sweetly scented room, soft music playing in the background, so relaxed that it was easy to overlook the many tiny needles sticking out of her head and abdomen.

Gallo has learned to ignore the needles as she braves acupuncture treatment to help her have a child.

"I'm deathly scared of needles," she said. "The first time, I felt like a pincushion. But if I can't handle this, how am I gonna deal with childbirth?"

Gallo is one of many Bay Area women

turning to acupuncture as a treatment for infertility. Acupuncture has become increasingly accepted by the medical establishment as a treatment to reduce pain and stress, and there have been multiple studies on its effects on infertility in the past decade. But even as many patients use acupuncture to successfully help them have children, scientists still are unsure how it works, or if it's effective.

Acupuncture involves placing very thin needles at specific points on the body. It doesn't hurt, said Gallo, "although you sometimes feel a pinch, like a pinprick."

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Fertility

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The effectiveness of acupuncture has a lot to do with calming stress hormones, said Shasta Tierra, Gallo's acupuncturist in San Jose.

"The stress that goes along with trying to conceive is huge," said Tierra, who has been practicing acupuncture for 18 years and uses "both acupuncture and Chinese herbs to try to restore balance to the body."

Gallo said the three-times-a-week treatments leave her feeling relaxed and energized. Gallo married three years ago at age 38, and said she decided to try acupuncture after suffering multiple miscarriages.

"The last miscarriage was one of the worst things I've ever been through. Physical, emotional, mental—it hits you at every level," Gallo said. She checked with her gynecologist, who thought trying acupuncture was a good idea.

It's fairly common for patients who are undergo-

ing fertility treatments to also use acupuncture, said Lynn Westphal, a physician and associate professor in the department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Stanford University School of Medicine. Stanford has an acupuncturist on staff, and Westphal said she has seen acupuncture become increasingly popular in the past five to 10 years, maybe a result of more scientific studies supporting acupuncture treatment for various ailments.

A recent UC San Francisco study observed 428 couples for 18 months after they visited a Bay Area reproductive clinic and found that nearly a quarter had used acupuncture and nearly 1 in 5 had used herbal therapy to treat infertility.

"We found that couples most commonly used acupuncture and other alternative treatments if they had higher incomes, had not achieved a pregnancy with Western fertility treatment and had a pre-existing belief that these treatments would be effective," said James Smith, a UCSF assistant professor in urology who con-



LIPO CHING/STAFF

Acupuncturist Shasta Tierra places acupuncture needles on Tina Allen Gallo's ear at Way of Wellness in San Jose.

ducted the study.

Johanna Danes, another of Tierra's patients, is a believer.

Danes had one daughter, but after several miscarriages, she started visiting Tierra two years ago. Danes became pregnant one month after she started the treatment. She went through another month of treatment and successfully carried her second daughter, Avery, through the rest of her pregnancy.

But the evidence underlying the use of acupuncture is inconsistent, and the scientific studies so far have only shown benefits when it's used in conjunction with in vitro fertilization treatment, or IVF.

"We don't know the impact of acupuncture on pregnancies unrelated to IVF," said Alice Domar, executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health at Boston IVF, and assistant profes-

sor of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Biology at Harvard Medical School.

A study in 2002 showed a 16 percent increase in pregnancies when women undergoing IVF treatment also had acupuncture, Domar said. But since then, several more studies of acupuncture during IVF have had more mixed results where "half the research says there's an increase in pregnancy rates, and half doesn't," she said.

A 2008 study found about a 10 percent increase from IVF when acupuncture was added to the treatment, which is similar to what Deming Huang has seen as a licensed acupuncturist at the Stanford Integrative Medicine Clinic. Huang has worked with more than 1,000 patients in 11 years at the Stanford clinic and said he has observed about a 7 percent increase in conception when acupuncture is used with IVF or intrauterine insemination, which involves placing sperm inside a woman's uterus to facilitate fertilization.

But Huang said he has seen patients benefit from

acupuncture even without IVF, and his oldest patient to conceive naturally with acupuncture was most helpful when someone was having difficulty having children but didn't know what the problem was, and "the needles are also able to reduce the risk of miscarriage."

Both Domar and Westphal believe acupuncture may help fertility by reducing stress, increasing blood flow and relaxing the uterus, although no one has shown how acupuncture works.

And the bottom line is "it's inexpensive, and there's no downside," Domar said. "At the very least, women feel more relaxed and less anxious."

As Gallo finished a recent session, she said she was the last person she expected to be trying acupuncture.

"I'm a big skeptic, and I'm definitely not a holistic person," she said. "But I love children. If it worked, I'd go see a witch doctor and dance around."

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