Part I: Acupuncture and Pregnancy

While becoming pregnant is wonderful news, especially for couples who have faced fertility challenges, it is only the beginning of the journey. Unfortunately, not all pregnancies are 40 weeks of smooth sailing. Some women are faced with more serious concerns, such as vaginal bleeding (and therefore presumed threatened miscarriages), giving rise to much stress and anxiety, while others suffer from severe nausea/vomiting. While a healthy lifestyle, including a well-balanced diet and appropriate exercise, can help minimize these issues, for some women medical intervention is necessary. In the realm of complementary medicine, acupuncture has been found to greatly benefit pregnant women, especially since it has minimal side effects to both the mother and the baby.

Threatened miscarriage is the most serious concern with any pregnancy. It is experienced by about 20% of pregnant women, and presents primarily with vaginal bleeding. While the majority of miscarriages are attributed to chromosomal abnormality, the reason for the rest is often poorly understood. The conventional medical approach to vaginal bleeding is often simply “watchful waiting.” Patients rely mostly on supportive care interventions such as abstinence from intercourse, bed rest, relaxation techniques, and psychological counseling. Acupuncture is a complementary therapeutic option that has been found to be safe and has demonstrated encouragingly successful effectiveness.

One study that examined the collective benefit of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) treatment options for threatened miscarriage concluded that although more evidence is needed investigating the effect of acupuncture in this area, at the very least, its effects on hormonal balance and stress reduction appear to improve the clinical outcome.[1] Another study confirms the effect of acupuncture on the hormone
profile of pregnant women, which in turn shortened vaginal bleeding.[2] Progesterone is a hormone that reduces the irritability of the uterus and promotes the maintenance of the pregnancy. Since low progesterone levels can be a contributing factor in miscarriage, the effect of acupuncture on hormone levels may be part of the way it helps improve outcomes of threatened miscarriage.

In addition to effects on hormone levels, acupuncture may have its own effects on the uterus. Studies not directly examining miscarriage — but conducted among women with various pelvic/uterine conditions such as fibroids, endometriosis, etc. —, as well as a study in women with infertility, have shown therapeutic effects from use of acupuncture, improving these conditions and increasing blood flow to the uterus.[3, 4] These might represent independent, non-hormonal ways that acupuncture reduces the risk of miscarriage. One study found that women who received fertility treatment with acupuncture and moxibustion (a method of applying external heat above the point) regularly for three menstrual cycles had not only improved ovulation rates, but also lower miscarriage rates compared to women receiving only Clomid treatment.[5]

In part II, we will examine the role of acupuncture in another common concern in pregnancy: nausea and vomiting.

References
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Acupuncture, Pregnancy, and Perinatal Health

From pregnancy to post natal blues

Part II: Nausea and Vomiting of Pregnancy

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Nausea and vomiting of pregnancy, often referred to as morning sickness, affects 60–70% of all pregnant women.\(^1\) These symptoms are not limited to only the morning hours; they can persist all day. Although it is usually self-limiting, disappearing by week 16, it is a nuisance to live with. In more serious cases, it can present as hyperemesis gravidarum (severe nausea and vomiting that does not allow the pregnant woman to ingest food in adequate amounts to support the pregnancy or her own nutritional needs).

The mechanism for how and why nausea of pregnancy happens is not well-defined; however, it is thought to be in part due to the action of human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) on certain centers in the brain, as well as effects on the digestive tract.\(^1, 2\) The hormone hCG is “the pregnancy hormone” and rises quickly in the first trimester, which may explain why nausea is often worse then. One of its effects is slowing gastric (stomach) emptying, which could predispose to nausea.\(^2\)

A number of studies have shown that compared to no treatment or sham acupuncture, traditional acupuncture helps to reduce the frequency and severity of nausea and vomiting, both during pregnancy as well as in other populations.\(^3, 4, 5\) Another Australian study involving over 500 women found that weekly acupuncture for four weeks significantly reduced the incidents of nausea and dry retching in pregnant women, compared to both no treatment and sham acupuncture.\(^4\) Effects were seen as early as two weeks in.

It addition to less severe nausea and vomiting, acupuncture has also shown effectiveness for hyperemesis gravidarum, as an adjunctive therapy to standard medical treatments for the condition.\(^6\) A small Korean study examined use of a single acupuncture point,
called PC6, for hyperemesis gravidarum, and concluded that acupuncture at this particular point reduced vomiting, ketouria (an indication that the pregnant woman has not been eating adequately), as well as rate for hospitalization, compared to either no treatment or placebo.[7] Finally, according to a systematic literature review, the benefits of acupuncture is not limited to nausea and vomiting when used for pregnant women; it is also effective for back pain, which often appears in the later stages of pregnancy, as well as for breech presentation of the baby, and management of labour pains.[7]

In part III, we will shift gears and move into the role of acupuncture in supporting recovery post-birth, particularly with respect to maternal health.

References
1. Festin, M. "Nausea and vomiting in early pregnancy". Clinical Evidence (online), 2009.
Although the birth of a healthy full-term baby is a joyous occasion, many women experience challenges while transitioning to being a new mother. These challenges could be physical and/or mental emotional, and postpartum depression and difficulties with breast-feeding being common examples. We will discuss breast-feeding-related concerns in part IV; here we focus on the therapeutic role of acupuncture in postpartum depression.

Postpartum depression is experienced by 10–15% of women. It is much more than just a so-called “psychological disorder,” because it impacts other aspects of health as well, such as sleep quality, energy levels, and the ability of the mother to engage in other important health-related activities such as eating properly and resuming appropriate exercise.[1] A number of factors increase the risk of developing postpartum depression, including the mother’s nutritional status[2] and her level of physical activity;[3] these are important to consider when approaching postpartum depression. However, in addition to these, acupuncture is a therapy that may be a good adjunct, since it does not require a large amount of expenditure of energy on the part of the mother, and in fact can be a time for her to rest.

It is well-documented that acupuncture is an effective treatment option for depression.[4, 5] How effective is it for depression associated with pregnancy specifically? The evidence that exists on the subject is encouraging. A study involving 61 patients with depression during pregnancy randomized subjects to two groups: one group was treated with massage therapy, and the other with acupuncture, both for eight weeks. The authors concluded that the patients treated with acupuncture showed statistically significant better results compared to those who received massage therapy.[6] Another study compared true acupuncture treatment to sham acupuncture for the effectiveness at
treating major depressive disorder postpartum. These patients displayed mild symptoms at the onset of the study. The results of this study showed that both acupuncture and sham acupuncture reduced depressive symptoms compared to baseline, though the difference between the two was not statistically significant. Since depression is a psychological disorder, it is possible that the so-called “placebo effect” of receiving sham acupuncture had a greater impact than expected.[7]

In part IV, we will discuss the role of acupuncture in assisting with breast-feeding-related problems. Stay tuned…

References
Difficulty with adequate milk supply and successful breast-feeding is an area of frequent difficulty for mothers of newborns. Often, the source of the issue is that the mother is not able to produce adequate breast milk, causing anxiety and further challenges. Mastitis is another frequent problem, leading to inflammation, pain, and problems breast-feeding. Acupuncture may not come to mind when dealing with such issues; however, in addition to a long history of traditional use, there is a surprising amount of research that has been done in this area. In this section, we discuss the potential benefits of acupuncture in improving milk-supply issues, mastitis.

While many mothers understand the benefits of breast-feeding, challenges often lead to early termination of breast-feeding. Both traditional somatic acupuncture as well as auricular acupuncture have shown promising results in increasing lactation in mothers who are experiencing hypolactation.\[^{1,2}\] Another study that examined 90 mothers with newborn babies compared the length of breast-feeding of those being observed (by seeing a midwife weekly for 3 weeks), to those who received acupuncture treatment twice a week for 3 weeks. The observation group had statistically lower rates of breast-feeding by month‐3 postpartum, suggesting that acupuncture may help women avoid or overcome some of the commonly encountered problems.\[^{4}\]

In China, traditional herbal medicine is often used alongside acupuncture to treat conditions such as inadequate lactation. Chinese herbal concoctions often have strong and unpleasant tastes; so it is fortunate that according to one study, acupuncture alone may be equally effective compared to herbal formulations in treating low milk production.\[^{3}\]

Mastitis is defined as inflammation of the breast caused by a number of factors such
as engorgement of breasts (hyperlactation), blocked milk ducts, and bacterial infection resulting from broken nipple skin. It is a painful condition that can interfere with successful breast-feeding. Treatment options for mastitis are limited to home-care methods such as cold compresses, unless bacterial infection is involved, in which case, antibiotics may be prescribed. Therefore there is a need for safe and effective clinical interventions for mastitis that pose few side effects. A Chinese study involving 15 patients found that daily acupuncture treatment completely alleviated symptoms of mastitis within 2.5 days on average.\[5\]

In summary, acupuncture can be used as an effective therapy for a wide range of gynecological and postpartum issues. Although more rigorous studies are needed to better explain the effects of acupuncture in these conditions, acupuncture poses little side effects, and may represent both a safe and effective option for women.

References