

Yoga & Fertility

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Introduction

In traditional yoga theory there are specific yoga practices that can improve fertility. They include specific postures, mantras and breathing techniques. These exercises improve fertility by regulating hormone levels improving blood and nutrient supply to for example the eggs, ovaries, tubes, uterus, testes and prostate. In doing this they maximize the health of these organs. More importantly for potential older mums they slow down the aging of cells and therefore eggs. Of course these practices were not developed for this specific purpose, as Yoga Philosophy has much broader aspirations. However we can all still benefit from improving our fertility based on this knowledge. These postures mantras and breath techniques are to be taught gradually and progressively and can be mastered by most people.

Scientific research is frequently looking at the aging process and what contributes to the aging of our cells. This has been of interest to the Yogis for a long time. They have developed a series of exercises and breathing techniques to address this. However these practices go beyond slowing down the aging process. They were developed to tap into our human potential. They understood that we only used 10 % of our brain cells and they wanted to know how we could turn on the other 90%. What is our potential if we can do this? This was the aim, and this is why these practices were developed. In an aging society that wants to conceive this offers a balanced healthy approach. However this slowing down of the aging of cells and for example a woman's eggs can only be achieved within a wholistic framework. In other words no practice will fully achieve its potential if basic health issues are not addressed. I have found this repeatedly to be true in my own clinical experience.

Yoga is a practical commonsense system that gives us tools to be healthy. From this point of view it is maintenance. If your eggs and uterus have an expiry date it extends the expiry date because the wear and tear is minimized. Like the effect of having regular grease and oil changes to your car. However Yoga potentially offers more than this for fertility. Yoga used wholistically can increase the fertile time in our life. This is a huge subject and it deserves much more attention than I have the space to write here. There is ongoing scientific research investigating these theories and I am in the process of writing on this in greater depth. In this short paper however I would like to briefly introduce some of the theories and give you an interesting case history as an example.

While being trained in traditional Yoga, my main practice is in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), using Acupuncture, Chinese medicine diet therapy and Chinese Herbal medicine. I have specialised in treating male and female infertility, primary

and secondary over the fourteen years of my practice. When used wholistically, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a lot to contribute to the treatment of infertility. In the TCM model we are taught while diagnosing, to look at relevant theories and apply them to the individual's case. I have used this approach with Yoga during my classes and patient consultations. This has provided me with a opportunity to test traditional Yoga theories and use the tools it provides.

Historical Background

I believe the main benefit of Yoga in supporting Fertility is in the wholistic model. Yoga in its ancient form is totally wholistic. And like other forms of traditional models it offers a balanced approach to health, while providing practical tools to achieve that health. Pantanjali wrote about 'The Eight limbs of Yoga' in the Yoga Sutra's 2,600 years ago. They are: 1. Yama 2. Niyama 3. Asana 4. Pranayama 5. Pratyahara 6. Dharana 7. Dhyana 8. Samadi. I am particularly interested in the first four, as they offer us practical application for general health and fertility, while the other limbs take us beyond our purposes here. Most Yoga classes today teach only Asana's or postures. I believe this limits the potential of yoga for our health. Yoga philosophy was already in a very advanced stage of its development at the time of these writings. This suggests that like TCM it is a complex science in itself that modern day science is unravelling only as quickly as science's understanding of the body improves.

The Wholistic approach of the first four limbs of Yoga

1. Yama - self-restraint

This covers our addictions to foods or chemicals that compromise our health. No Yoga exercises no matter how advanced will counteract or override bad lifestyle habits and poor diet. These issues must be addressed as a priority in order to gain any real benefit from the Yoga exercises. Yama philosophy goes beyond this to suggest cultivating a certain mental attitude in life to help us achieve this end. This attitude is one of a mind that is not self-obsessed, but rather has a mental attitude of compassion and genuine interest in others, with a joyful uncompelled generosity. I think there may be a hint of how to achieve our own inner contentment here, which will give us the strength to deal with our addictions and necessary lifestyle changes. In a society that is obsessed with the pursuit of self-satisfaction this is possibly more relevant than ever before.

2. Niyama - fixed rules

This incorporates the importance of healthy daily rituals such as brushing our teeth. The philosophy around Niyama suggests that there are some necessary practices that are as important as this and yet continue to go ignored. It includes eating well and at proper hours, keeping a healthy digestive system including absorption and elimination and maintaining clear and unblocked sinus passages.

Proper sinus drainage is one of the most important issues in Yoga, and is very relevant as we see an increase in people who suffer from sinus allergies and congestion. It is important because blocked sinuses effect left and right brain balance in Yoga theory. This can lead to all sorts of health problems as well as strong hormonal imbalances.

The Yoga practice of Netti looks at giving us a very effective tool to clear the sinuses. This is very successful when used in conjunction with an appropriate diet that eliminates foods that are not tolerated while increasing foods that nourish and promote healthy digestion. Netti is a sinus drainage exercise using warm salty water. This practice is frequently recommended on a daily basis. The importance of the regular use of netti is based on the Yoga teachings of the three main nadis or channels in the body. These channels in yoga are part of a network of channels that cover the whole body from the surface of the skin, to the brain and all other internal organs in the body. It is similar to the meridian system in TCM.

One channel starts from the cervix in a woman and alternatively the prostate in men, and then continues along the spinal cord to the base of the skull, and then into the brain. The other two channels travel crisscrossing each other the whole length of the spinal cord and end with one passing through the right nostril into the left hemisphere of the brain and the other going through the left nostril into the right hemisphere of the brain. These channels are called Ida and Pingala and are activated by breathing through the left and right nostrils. If we cannot do this, these two channels will not stimulate the left and right hemispheres of the brain. When this happens over a long period of time the implications for a person's health is hugely significant.

3. Asana's- postures

The spinal column nerve plexus go to every organ in the body. A strong and supple spine with good nerve and blood supply is vital for overall health. In this way all yoga when taught well can assist fertility. However the learning of Surya Namaska in conjunction with breath awareness and specific mantras with each movement is said to affect our health on a cellular level and slow down aging in this way. This should be taught progressively and is made more powerful if combined with other breathing techniques.

4. Pranayama - breath control

TCM and Yoga have each a theory on the science of the breath that supports the concepts that if we do not breathe properly our immunity, libido, hormonal balance and health both physically and emotionally will be compromised. The breathing technique Nadi Shodan meaning 'alternate nostril' is an exercise to correct left right brain imbalance firstly and secondly to move beyond this to stimulate into activity the 90% of brain cells which we do not use. This is one of

the most important breathing techniques in Yoga due to its far-reaching benefits. Pranayama is a greatly underestimated part of yoga and there are many other relevant techniques that regulate hormone function.

Case History

Increasingly in my practice I am noticing that the causes of infertility in the majority of cases are not complex. That the answer to the infertility issues again in the majority of cases, really do simply lie in the need for lifestyle and dietary changes, and that my role more is one of observer, educator and guide to obtain these results. Increasingly I do not need to develop complex treatment strategies using TCM, though the option to do this is there if needed. TCM has a wonderful insight into the causes of infertility and appropriate treatment to correct these causes. These insights into this particular field alone go back more than a thousand years.

Chinese medicines collective case history experience on this subject is vast. For their time amazingly complex diagnosis and treatment protocols were developed and exercised. Most of these protocols are used today and still offer insights and treatments that are unparalleled. My main point however is that mostly I am finding the causes of infertility, primary and secondary are very simple and do not need much intervention but more guidance with dietary and lifestyle changes tailored to suit the individual.

Female 31 years of age, history of primary infertility/attempting conception unsuccessfully over a three-year period. Suffered irregular menstrual cycles since puberty. Infrequent periods and cycles range from 3-6 months apart. No sign of fertile mucus. Other important symptoms, long history of weak digestive system with chronic loose stools 3-5 x per day, lots of constant bloating and wind, very fatigued, bad pmt with swollen breasts and irritability one week before bleed with painful periods. The immediate tests I recommended were: Ultrasound to check for polycystic ovaries due to her long cycles and fibroids due to her period pain; Blood tests for hormonal levels especially to check prolactin levels due to her long cycles. I thought tests to check her tubes and for endometriosis could be an option for later, but was not important immediately. Test results: No sign of polycystic ovaries or fibroids. Prolactin levels normal. FSH slightly elevated and estrogens and progesterone low.

TCM Diagnosis

Apart from the main symptoms above, there were many other symptoms that created a pattern for me based on TCM diagnosis principals.

1. Poor digestion or malabsorption of food.

I thought that as a result her ovaries were under active. Poor nourishment leads to insufficient nutrients and nutrient levels necessary to encourage ovulation. As if the body thought she was in a famine and had shut down functions that were not life essential, such as ovulation. I thought this malabsorption was also contributing to a thyroid under activity. As a result of poor absorption and sluggish liver function I believed she was hypoglycaemic. I thought this would be adding to the distress to her system and her hormonal balance. TCM sp qi xu, cold damp spleen and stuck liver qi.

2. As a result of malabsorption and poor levels of nutrients in her blood, I believed this caused her progesterone and estrogens functions to be low.

TCM diagnosis sp qi xu finally leading to Kidney yg xu and kidney qi xu. This would put her at risk for miscarriage if she did conceive and needed therefore to be addressed. The sluggish liver function was leading to the poor regulation of estrogens as if her body was not producing healthy estrogens and progesterone. This would account for her bad pmt.

3. I noticed that she was always a mouth breather though she did not have any sinus problems in particular.

TCM Treatment Protocols

1. Main priority to use acupuncture to get her cycle regular, increase fertile mucus and improve progesterone levels to avoid miscarriage.
2. Using Chinese Medicine Diet therapy improve gut flora, create normal digestion, absorption and elimination. Treat candida with supplements and diet.
3. Using acupuncture and diet regulate and improve liver function. In TCM the liver channel travels through the reproductive organs. As a result we see the liver as playing a significant role in reproductive health and fertility.
4. Monitor ovulation, mucus and leuteal phase (the phase after ovulation) with a temperature chart.
Start a Yoga class

Treatment Results

Periods started to become regular after the first treatment. Charting her temperature showed a gradual improvement in her leuteal phase. As this was very weak I thought her risk for miscarriage was very high so I recommended she not time it for conception until this short leuteal phase was improved. Digestion absorption and stools improved significantly.

After regular cycles she had a shock when her handbag was grabbed from her car in a local supermarket. Just after this she travelled to Asia for work and contracted a bad stomach bug. Her regular periods stopped immediately. This shock greatly effected her cycle. This I have seen time and time again when woman are faced with trauma their system goes into shock and their hormones and as a result fertility may not recover without intervention.

Over the next five months there seemed nothing that we could do to rectify the situation.

I decided to focus on adjusting the effects of her mouth breathing. I worked on her lungs and general respiratory system in her acupuncture treatments and gave her Nadi Shodan 'alternate nostril breathing' as an exercise. We found that if she did the practice 4x per week for 20 minutes duration her cycle became regular. The effect was immediate. Later she regularly started the practice of netti that is the sinus cleaning technique. We found that doing this practice alone was sufficient to keep her cycles regular while she continued a healthy diet.

It is worth noting that throughout this time she attended regular general Yoga classes where she was taught the postures or asana's. She really enjoyed these classes but the focusing on physical suppleness and strength alone was clearly not adequate. She clearly benefited from approaching Yoga in a wholistic form.

This patient has now had regular cycles over the last year. Ironically as personal circumstances would dictate she has found it necessary to delay becoming a mum for the time being. Despite our disappointment in that decision, we have both learnt so much from this experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to say that there are many tools amongst Yoga theories that can support fertility. However before looking for complex solutions and rituals, we need to honestly evaluate our health and be prepared to improve our diet and modify our lifestyle and addictions. Health problems must be addressed and mostly they can be using a complimentary and wholistic model.