

Relief for overdue moms - Acupuncture gains favour for inducing labour

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EDMONTON - How to induce an overdue baby: go for a long ride on a bumpy road, take a dose of castor oil, eat LOTS of fresh pineapple (about seven whole pineapples!), have sex, stimulate nipples, walk like crazy. Anything but getting medically induced, which Pam Sharpe heard is really, really painful.

"My doctor even said you really don't want to be induced (five to 10 per cent of pregnant women are) so do whatever you can this weekend to have this baby."

So six days overdue, all walked out and facing an induction the next morning, Sharpe, on the advice of a friend and as a last resort, went to an acupuncturist who needled her, seeded her ears and brought on labour hours before she was to be hooked up to a drip.

Her second son, Tyler, now 31/2 months old, was born in a fraction of the time, with half as much pain as his tardy older brother Dylan, 21/2, who was born five days late.

"I had never had acupuncture before but it had worked for other members of my family for other ailments -- my mom for her tennis elbow, my sister for her chronic stomach aches, so I was open to the idea," the Sherwood Park mom says.

Sharpe's treatment involved inserting two needles near the inside of her ankles to help stimulate contractions, two in her tailbone to stimulate her uterus, two in her lower back to stimulate the kidneys -- which Chinese medicine believes to be the source of the body's energy -- and one in each hand between the thumb and forefinger, also to stimulate contractions.

The essence of acupuncture is to insert needles of varying lengths and thickness into specific points on the body to get the body's energy or qi (pronounced chee) moving, explains Darcy Friesen, the St. Albert acupuncturist who induced Sharpe.

He has an 80-per-cent success rate inducing labour. But even those women for whom acupuncture didn't work -- not even a medical induction will bring on labour if it's not time -- find their labour goes quicker once baby starts to come.



CREDIT: Chris Schwarz, the Journal

Pam Sharpe, centre, turned to acupuncturist Darcy Friesen, right, for aid when she was overdue with Tyler, left, who is now 31/2 months old.

Friesen won't induce a woman unless she has the OK of the obstetrician or general practitioner who will be delivering her baby.

Sharpe says the needles felt like little pricks being inserted, and she was a little nervous when the needles were connected to electrodes to make her feel more comfortable, but overall, the 30-minute procedure was quite relaxing.

"I was away from my two-year-old," she says laughing, "lying comfortably on my stomach, which was propped up with special pillows, the room was dark and there was music playing."

She didn't feel any contractions.

Friesen finished the treatment by taping tiny seeds over specific points in her ears that she could press or rub to keep stimulating the body's energy flow after leaving the clinic. It's not so much the type of seeds he used -- vicaria seeds -- as their texture, small and hard, the better to put pressure on the points. Sesame seeds, for example, are too soft for the job. The seeds can be left in place for up to five days before being replaced to avoid infection, Friesen says.

See INDUCTION / D2

"I was driving along rubbing the seeds in my ears, especially the ones that Darcy told me released (oxytocin, the contraction) hormones," Sharpe remembers. "I rubbed them like crazy about every five minutes or so and I felt a warm kind of rush every time I rubbed those specific seeds.

"By bedtime I was feeling a heaviness like I felt the night before I had my first son, as if my water was about to break," Sharpe says. "My husband, Rob, didn't believe me at all because I had been saying for a couple of weeks, 'Oh, maybe I'll have the baby tonight.'

"He said 'Yeah, whatever. We're going at eight in the morning (to the hospital to be induced.)'"

At 3 a.m. Sharpe awoke to find her water had broken and after a quick call to Capital Health LINK, a health information line, she and Rob headed to the hospital.

She experienced her first contraction just before reaching the hospital. There she entertained nurses, showing them how she could bring on a contraction within 30 seconds of rubbing her ear seeds.

"They put me on the drip right away, which was fine because I was in labour for 20 hours with my first kid, and actually, it was amazing, the contractions really weren't painful this time (a four on a scale of 10, compared to nine, with the birth of Dylan). I

could breathe through them, I was walking through them, I was fine, which kind of got me in trouble because all of a sudden I had a contraction that hurt. When I said OK, I want an epidural (an anaesthetic for below the waist) NOW, it was too late, I was already pushing."

Twenty minutes later, Sharpe was holding her newborn in her arms.

She is convinced the acupuncture induced her labour and minimized the pain of childbirth but obstetrician/gynecologist Dr. Jacquie McCubbin says she's never had a patient who found it very useful, or no more so than taking that bumpy ride or eating spicy food.

"Though there was one patient we had at the hospital who did manage to use acupuncture in labour to get her baby to flip around from breach, so it's certainly been used at our hospital, but I don't think anybody has a whole lot of experience," McCubbin says.

On the other hand, Dr. Michael Coe, a St. Albert obstetrician/gynecologist has nothing but good things to say about acupuncture.

"Whether it's acupuncture or any other method that stimulates the uterus to be irritable and possibly go on into actual active labour, whatever you do, you should do no harm. That's why I'm very comfortable about acupuncture," he says. "It's non-invasive and if the patient isn't ready, it isn't going to work, but any prudent acupuncturist would never accept a patient's request (to be induced) he would do it only in conjunction with the attending doctor."

Although Coe refers moms-to-be to Friesen to help bring on labour, he refers more for relief of their aches and pains or to help them stop smoking.

"I don't understand how acupuncture works, it wasn't part of my training. I can't explain it in the way I understand western medicine, but it works. So if it's safe and it works why would I question it?" Coe says.

Both doctors advise pregnant women thinking of acupuncture to first talk to their doctors.

Before her own acupuncture-induced labour, Sharpe says she had never heard of the treatment, known primarily for pain relief, being used to prod a baby to birth. "Now all of a sudden I hear about it everywhere."