

Acupuncture during Pregnancy and Birth

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<http://pregnancytoday.com/reference/articles/acupuncture.htm>

In most medical treatment, the words “needle” and “relaxing” don’t generally go together.

But when Holly Buchanan of Newmarket, N.H., turned to acupuncture to induce labor at 42 weeks, she experienced “a wave of warmth and realization that gave me a moment to reflect on my body, instead of having my head filled with worry over my first baby being overdue.”

One Harvard University study estimates that Americans visit acupuncturists more than five million times a year. The National Institutes of Health reports ever increasing use of acupuncture by thousands of doctors, dentists and other practitioners to treat or prevent many illnesses.

Chinese medicine identifies more than 2,000 acupuncture points connected with pathways called meridians that conduct vital energy or qi (pronounced “chee”) throughout the body. Illness or symptoms are associated with an imbalance of this vital energy. Acupuncture uses hair-thin, disposable needles to stimulate specific areas associated with organ functions in order to restore balance and help the body maintain its own health.

As more women seek drug-free treatment for the conditions of pregnancy, this ancient Chinese healing art has much to offer, says acupuncturist and midwife Valerie Hobbs, director of the Boulder, Colo., campus of Southwest Acupuncture College. With no contraindications, it can treat many conditions for which there is rarely another lasting or effective remedy.

Pointing the Way to Healthy Pregnancy

Acupuncture treatment during pregnancy benefits both Baby and Mother, Hobbs says. “Certain [infant] organ systems develop at certain points in the pregnancy. Babies may be influenced by what is termed ‘maternal toxins,’ resulting in a childhood tendency for higher fevers when sick, more frequent childhood illness and a tendency for skin problems such as diaper rash and eczema. Regular balancing treatments throughout pregnancy enhance the health of the mother, prevent complications and influence the development of the baby.”



Treatments are normally given once a month until the last month, when weekly sessions help prepare for labor, she says. An average session lasts 45 minutes, and women usually only feel a mild sensation such as a feeling of slight heaviness at the site of needle insertion.

While some treatments may cause a slight increase in fetal movements, no treatment, unless intended to start labor, should significantly increase uterine activity, Hobbs cautions. In most states except California, acupuncturists must be nationally certified as a diplomat of acupuncture. An additional national certification is available in Chinese herbology, says Hobbs, who holds both certifications.

Among the many benefits of acupuncture during pregnancy, a recent study has shown its particular effectiveness in relieving morning sickness or the potentially more dangerous hyperemesis gravidarum (severe vomiting during pregnancy). The Australian study published in the journal *Birth* reports that of 593 women less than 14 weeks pregnant who participated, those who received traditional acupuncture reported having less frequent and shorter periods of nausea than the women who received no acupuncture. These improvements were felt immediately and lasted throughout the study's four-week duration. In the first trimester, acupuncture can also relieve fatigue, migraines and bleeding.

As it helps maintain balance during the second trimester, acupuncture can alleviate heartburn, hemorrhoids and stress. While acupuncture can also be used to treat edema, elevated blood pressure or excessive weight gain, the root cause of these may be deeper complications, says Hobbs. "Acupuncturists with adequate training in the care of pregnant women would recognize the potentially serious nature of these symptoms and only offer care concurrent with adequate Western medical care."

Third-trimester treatment can bring much-needed relief from sciatica, backache, pubic and joint pain and even carpal tunnel syndrome, and benefits are sometimes immediate, notes Hobbs. This is also the time when special attention is given to proper positioning of the baby. "By 32 to 34 weeks, the acupuncturist should begin to encourage a head-down position," she says. "In the last four to six weeks, the mother will receive treatments to normalize and optimize labor."

Birth and Beyond

Research reported in a November 1998 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* finds that an aspect of acupuncture called moxabustion, when applied to 130 pregnant women with breech presentations, significantly increased the number of head-first births. Used for centuries in China to turn breech babies, moxabustion employs long sticks of the herb moxa to produce a gentle, smoldering heat and a smoke that are held close to an acupuncture point in the little toe. The treatment, most effective at 32 to 36 weeks, should only be used in healthy pregnancies.

Acupuncture is used during labor itself mainly to facilitate pain relief and boost energy. But if needed, it can also help stimulate contractions without the use of drugs, says

Hobbs. "This is best accomplished over two to three successive days of one-hour treatments, so early referral is essential."

Buchanan first sought acupuncture for relief from a prolonged asthma attack. Successful treatment made her more confident about acupuncture as a means to induce labor. "It has less impact on an unborn baby than the drugs that are used." "It has less impact on an unborn baby than the drugs that are used," she says. Although she didn't receive acupuncture during labor itself, Buchanan did receive acupressure during labor with her second child. "It helped tremendously with low back pain, as my babies have big heads and were posterior [deliveries]," says Buchanan.

Acupuncture can provide other benefits post-delivery, too. "Right after her baby was born, a friend of mine started to bleed very heavily," Buchanan says, remembering. "My acupuncturist got out her needles and poked my friend's toe, and it was like a faucet had been immediately turned off."

Postpartum is one of the most critical times for a woman to receive regular preventative care from a Chinese medical practitioner, says Hobbs. Acupuncturists can often offset years of "suboptimal" lifestyle and stress in the first few weeks postpartum, as well as intercept abnormalities in lochial flow to rectify years of menstrual irregularities and prevent them from occurring. "We theoretically prevent serious postpartum depression from occurring by addressing the normal recuperative cycle in the woman," she says.

In addition to restoring a mother's energy levels after the stress of birth and alleviating depression and anxiety, acupuncture can be used postpartum to relieve backache, perineal or other kinds of pain.

Isabel Viana of Durango, Colo., has appreciated acupuncture's effectiveness ever since it relieved a 30-year-old pain in her lower back related to undiagnosed food allergies. Two years ago, she sought acupuncture again to help with healing after the Cesarean section that delivered her daughter.



"I recovered rather fast and completely," Viana says. "I had two treatments, once a week, starting about a week after I gave birth. Two weeks after surgery, my abdomen was pain free. I've heard from other moms who still feel pain in their scar years after surgery. My doctor, who had a C-section herself, said that seven years later, she still felt a numbing in the area."

Acupuncture can provide serious help, but Buchanan notes that it can have its light moments, too. During the induction of her labor, "my practitioner applied electrical stimulation to some of the needles, and the machine, for some reason, kept on playing 'Happy Birthday' over and over!" she says. "She couldn't get it to shut off, and it made us all laugh since we were trying to stimulate labor. I took it as a good sign."