

## **Reduce Stress, Increase Fertility: Hormones could play role.**

Author: Lilian Presti

Date: 24/08/2009

Publication: The Baltimore Sun

Is your job stressing you out? What about your finances, relationships, mortgage, the state of the economy? It seems stress is an ever-present part of modern living, but this constant stress may very well be the reason why many couples are having a difficult time getting pregnant.

One in eight couples experience fertility issues, according to the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, and research has been emerging over the last few decades on the impact of stress on fertility.

Studies have shown that stress can prevent pregnancy by increasing too many of the fight-or-flight **hormones** such as cortisol and adrenaline, which can reduce sperm count and prevent ovulation. Stress hormones can interfere with these steps by preventing the actions of a key reproductive hormone known as gonadotropin releasing hormone (GnRH).

When GnRH is inhibited, it does not trigger the pituitary gland to produce and secrete other reproductive hormones.

New research from the University of California Berkeley is also showing that stress can also impact fertility by causing the increase of another reproductive hormone called Gonadotropin-Inhibitory Hormone (GnIH). This hormone further impedes procreation by preventing the GnRH hormone from being released.

"Stress had already been shown to affect all those other more traditional players in the sex hormone cascade but no one had looked at GnIH yet," says Elizabeth Kirby, a member of the research team. "So, our research basically adds a new piece to the puzzle of sex and reproduction - a new hormone known to suppress reproduction is also now known to increase in response to stress."

Ultimately, what this means is that stress works in more than just one way to impact fertility.

So just what is the antidote to daily stresses? Couples hoping to conceive should consider stress management techniques to improve their odds.

In addition to using traditionally recognized methods such as yoga and meditation to calm anxieties, acupuncture appears to be gaining popularity as a means to help counter the physiological effects of stress.

Anna Werderitsch, an acupuncturist and herbalist at Well Women Acupuncture in Los Angeles, says couples trying to conceive must address stress.

"Dealing with stress is critical because when stress levels are too high, the body reverts to a protective evolutionary tactic, deciding that the timing isn't safe enough to proceed with a pregnancy," says Werderitsch.

Werderitsch uses acupuncture to help her clients improve their chance at fertility. She says acupuncture works because of its ability to offset the damaging effects of stress through the stimulation of powerful beta-endorphins.

Beta-endorphins allow women to feel more relaxed through the reduction of the fight-or-flight hormones, which in turn helps restore balance to follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) levels--a key factor given that too much or too little FSH can interfere with the normal release of eggs during ovulation.

Acupuncture also helps boost fertility by improving nutrient delivery to vital areas such as the ovaries and uterus through better blood flow.

But acupuncture isn't just for women, says Werderitsch. It can also help men mitigate the effects stress has on sexual desire and sperm motility, both important factors in conception.

Since it doesn't look like stress will be leaving our lives anytime soon, couples hoping to conceive should experiment with stress reduction techniques before turning to fertility drugs and in vitro fertilization.

And perhaps it would be wise to pay heed to a little age-old advice: Relax and let nature take its course.

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