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HERBS

For some couples, like the Murphys, getting pregnant and having their own children has become a daunting, exhausting, expensive and desperate business. Infertility is big business and yet for many all the high-tech options still don't produce results. So it's great news that nature offers a solution where human technology sometimes can't. Chris Erasmus reports.

Laura Murphy and her husband were among a group of couples who recently participated in the clinical trials for a new herbal supplement undertaken by Stanford University in the USA. At age 38, Laura had been told by two doctors that she 'would never be able to have children' and only 'stood a 15% chance of carrying a baby to term'. By chance, the couple saw an advertisement for the herbal study, and thought 'why not?' – they had, after all, little to lose.

Herbs have been used to keep us healthy for thousands of years. They've been prescribed to boost immunity, enhance healing, bring pain relief and balance hormones. In fact, a large percentage of pharmaceuticals on the market even today have their origins in herbal medicine. But the benefits of herbal medicine were overlooked from the early 19th Century when scientists began isolating the biochemically active constituents of healing plants. More recently, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), including herbal treatments, have enjoyed a revival, and are back on the medicine shelves of many homes and pharmacies, as well as in health shops.

While in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and hormonal treatments are the usual first stops for most Western couples (or single women) wanting to have their own child, it is becoming increasingly clear that other, more 'traditional' options may be more effective for some. With as many as one couple in five struggling to conceive after one year of unprotected sex, many face infertility clinics where treatment is not guaranteed and costs are not compensated. Some fertility specialists insist that the only way to manipulate infertility is to use modern technology, while others opt for non-invasive therapy. This means correcting hormone imbalances, counteracting damage to reproductive organs as a result of life-style and stress, promoting ovulation and improving sperm production.

Herbalists and naturopaths have for centuries – millennia even – known of treatments that came direct from nature to help with increased fertility. But in modern terms, that knowledge is enjoying a revival, stimulated in part by scientific research into the efficacy of certain herbal formulas. In November, 2004, for instance, doctors from Stanford University School of Medicine in the USA published trials on a scientific study for a specific nutritional supplement, FertilityBlend, designed to boost fertility in men and women. Using a herbal combination containing several fertility-friendly herbs in the right proportions to enhance fertility in men and women, the double-blind clinical trials showed one third of the women taking the supplement became pregnant within five months. In a similar three-month study for men, sperm count and mobility improved in the group taking the supplement compared to the placebo group who did not show any significant changes.

The efficacy of the herbal or natural supplement approach to infertility was reflected in a report earlier this year in *The Wall Street Journal*, in which there was reference to 'a number of scientific studies (which) support the effectiveness of these ingredients, but few brand-name blends have been rigorously tested. An exception is FertilityBlend.' According to one study quoted in the report, published in the *Journal of Clinic and Experimental Obstetrics and Gynecology*, of

93 women, 26% taking this formula became pregnant after three months, compared with just 10% of women taking a placebo (which has no clinical effect).

So the answer to the question, 'Can herbs help infertility?' is a definite 'Yes, in certain cases.'

'Some women simply don't need aggressive treatment,' said Lynn Westphal, co-author of the Stanford University project and assistant professor in Stanford's department of gynaecology and obstetrics. Depending on the cause of infertility, when herbs are prescribed in the right proportions, they can help couples to optimise their chances of conceiving naturally. In a paper entitled *Nutritional Issues in Fertility and Natural Alternatives*, three specialists, Westphal, Mary Lake Polan and Aileen Sontag Trant, investigated infertility and suggest that using nutritional supplements is the first step to 'improve physiological factors essential to fertility'. They agree that nutritional supplements are the least invasive, best-tolerated and most affordable option available to struggling couples.

Infertility can be caused by hormonal imbalances, ovulation problems, poor sperm production and endometrial problems. These can be exaggerated by life-style, poor eating habits and stress. At the start of treatment, couples are advised to stop smoking and drinking, exercise regularly, lose weight and learn to de-stress, by, for instance, meditating.

The women's formula for FertilityBlend contains chasteberry (*Vitex agnus-castus*) to balance hormones and improve ovulation, folic acid for the prevention of certain birth defects, green tea, vitamin E and selenium to improve reproductive health, L-arginine to improve libido and improve the endometrium lining and vitamins B6 and B12, iron, magnesium and zinc which can be directly related to fertility health. The formula for men contains L-carnitine to optimise sperm production and ferulic acid to improve their quality. Vitamin C and E, green tea and selenium for overall reproductive health, Vitamins B6 and B12, folic acid and zinc to improve hormone metabolism, sperm formation and motility.

So, what happened to the Murphys? Laura found that one month after participating in the study trial, she was pregnant. Not only did Laura carry her baby to term without any problems, with the same treatment, the couple conceived their second baby one year later after taking FertilityBlend for just one month. Today they boast about their 'two beautiful blond boys' who are the centre of their universe.

Of course, not all stories have an identical happy ending, but herbal treatment of fertility is definitely back on the radar screens of want-to-be mums, which has to be good news in itself. ○

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"FertilityBlend may enhance reproductive health as an integral part of an overall healthy lifestyle."
Dr Mary Lake Polan, M.D., Ph.D.,
Chair and Professor of the
Department of Gynecology and
Obstetrics at Stanford University
School of Medicine

"33% of Women in the supplement group became pregnant and None (0%) in the placebo group."
* Journal of Reproductive Medicine
Vol. 49, April 2004, No. 4.
Study conducted with Stanford University School of Medicine.

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