

Choosing an acupuncturist can be a real minefield. Here are some important things to consider while making that choice. They are not in priority order.

1. Location

Ideally the location should be close to your home, your work or your clinic. IVF appointments alone take up quite a bit of time, so make sure your acupuncture sessions do not consume too much additional time in your week.

2. Experience and knowledge

Your acupuncturist should be a help and support to you, rather than the other way around. If your practitioner doesn't know the practical logistics of IVF treatment or about the drugs and their timings, acupuncture treatment can become far more of an effort. Whilst it doesn't take long to learn this information and it is not necessary to make sure your practitioner has over 10 years experience, don't be afraid to sound people out and check how much they know or how often they deal with patients in your situation.

3. Flexible appointment structure

Your treatment plan is likely to vary according to how the IVF clinic thinks things are going. Good practitioners are often popular and so it is important to know you that you will be able to get appointments when you need them.

4. Back up if away

Some clinics have a large team and therefore are able to provide continual cover. Other practitioners, work alone, so it is useful to check whether they have arranged back up for if they have to be away from the clinic for any reason.

5. Ability to do pre- and post- embryo transfer acupuncture (7days a week)

Because recent research has focused strongly on the acupuncture treatments on the day of embryo transfer, it seems a good idea to make sure your acupuncturist will be able to see you on the day of the embryo transfer day before and after the procedure. This service should be available seven days a week. Occasionally embryo transfer is done very early in the morning making a pre transfer treatment difficult but in the main your clinic should be able to provide both where possible. In addition, because the research shows that timing is important, the treatment should be done as soon as possible before and after the embryo transfer. As many acupuncturists work alone and this is simply not possible, check in advance whether they have a back up plan for covering embryo transfers. It is very stressful to find out close to your embryo transfer day that your acupuncturist will be unavailable.

6. Specialist knowledge of gynae

Depending on your situation, your acupuncturist will need to know about the Western medicine details of your case, including the diagnosis and all the relevant blood test results. The more individual your case and the most specialised your IVF unit, the more your practitioner will need to be familiar with these aspects of treatment. Acupuncture has developed considerably in the last ten years, especially in treatment with fertility. It has become a very fashionable area to work in and many practitioners now say this is an area they specialise. Our experience has been that many are not as skilled in this area as they claim.

7. Knowledge of IVF units

IVF units can often operate very differently with different protocols, different beliefs and different methods. At the same time, they are often very busy and not so able to explain treatment and answer questions. An acupuncturist who knows your clinic/consultant well can answer many questions and provide great information support. Many acupuncturists have good relationships with consultants and nurses, which can also be a useful route to further information if needed.

8. Cost

IVF is an expensive process and financial considerations often play a role in choosing clinics and complementary services. Whilst it is our opinion that IVF support is a specialist area and should be valued, that does not give practitioners the right to charge greatly increased rates. The most expensive is not necessarily the best – there is no reason why acupuncture for IVF should be more expensive than acupuncture for other conditions, (although clearly some clinics have significant overhead costs that they have to cover). Unfortunately many couples will do anything or pay anything in the quest to become pregnant which leaves them in a very vulnerable position.

9. Recommendations

Acupuncturists receive many of their patients through word of mouth and patients usually only refer others when they have had a good experience. While your IVF unit may not actively promote acupuncture or provide it in-house, they are likely to know who in the nearby area is well known for this type of work. Consultants, nurses and receptionists all have a wealth of knowledge that may help. Internet forums provide modern day word of mouth and again very quickly can point you in the right direction.

10. Personality

Acupuncturists spend more time with their patients on a weekly basis than most Western consultants. They also speak in greater detail about what is going on in your life and will need to know in detail about your menstrual cycle. It is therefore important to feel comfortable with the practitioner that you are seeing. We all have different personalities and some practitioners will clearly be more suited to some patients. If you do not feel comfortable with your practitioner, look around.

And as a final point

11. Beware of false promises

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. In our opinion acupuncture can be a fantastic treatment and adjunct to IVF but it cannot fix every situation or resolve all problems. The opinion of your acupuncturist should be broadly in line with that of an IVF unit. There may be disagreement about the prognosis, but it should not usually be in stark contrast. Couples looking to conceive are in a vulnerable position and it is always good to be careful when considering your options. Positivity is a great thing but don't go to someone just because they are saying what you want to hear.