

Immune System Infertility: How to Address Autoimmune Fertility Issues

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Your immune system works hard to defend your body against harmful enemies. These can come in the form of parasites, viruses and bacteria, it's your immune system's job to ensure these enemies don't get out of hand and cause disease. For some people, however, the immune system sees its host (the person) as the enemy. This is called autoimmunity. There are now over one hundred autoimmune diseases and the list is growing at a rapid rate. It also appears that the number of cases is growing, particularly when it comes to rheumatic diseases, endocrine and gastrointestinal.^[1] In some cases of autoimmunity, the person's body can identify parts of their reproductive function as an enemy and send Natural Killer (NK) cells to attack. This is particularly common if there is any kind of inflammation in the uterus such as in cases of endometriosis or PCOS. Immunological recurrent miscarriage and anti-sperm antibodies are two of the most prevalent immunological fertility problems. Fortunately, there are a number of natural ways to address these issues as we'll discuss below. Firstly let's talk about the two most common causes of immune-related infertility:

Anti-sperm Antibodies

Antibodies can be triggered during an immune response; they then work to kill off the sperm. If someone produces lots of sperm antibodies the journey the sperm has to take to reach the egg can be hampered. These antibodies can also affect how robust the surviving sperm is. This then can increase the chances of a miscarriage.

Immunological Recurrent Miscarriage

There can be numerous reasons why this happens. Thrombophilia is a problem with blood clotting. This can lead to vessels in the placenta starving from a lack of oxygen. This is just one possible cause. Natural Killer (NK) cell activity is also known to be a major cause of miscarriage. Addressing inflammatory reproductive conditions such as endometriosis, PCOS and tubule inflammation can help to reduce the chances of a miscarriage.

Natural Ways to Address Immune System Infertility

Natural ways to address immunological fertility issues can include dietary adjustments, supplementation and lifestyle changes. Let's start with diet. It's best to make dietary changes for four months before conception and continue these changes throughout your pregnancy.

1. Protein is an important building block for life. We need protein to ensure we repair damaged cells and make new ones. Grass-fed organic meat in small quantities; small deep-sea fish like sardines and red snapper are all good sources of protein and omega 3.

2. Organic vegetables are required at each meal. Always aim for the rainbow on your plate and go for as much variety as possible. If you can't afford to purchase organic vegetables then make sure to wash your produce thoroughly.
3. Good fats such as olive oil and avocado are good for reducing inflammation and help to keep our cholesterol levels in check.
4. Avoid most grains and grain products. However quinoa, organic rice and amaranth are ok in small quantities
5. Avoid gluten, which is found in wheat, oats, barley, rye, spelt and semolina. Gluten will also pop up in brewer's yeast, soy sauce, mayonnaise and malt extract so you always need to check the label and be vigilant.
6. Herbs such as curcumin can be a good addition to an anti-inflammatory diet, as can parsley, coriander and sage.
7. Herbal teas such as nettle leaf, hibiscus and lemon balm can be good for improving cell integrity and blood cell formation.
8. Eliminate trans fats, which are commonly found in processed packaged foods such as bread, biscuits, cakes and lollies.
9. Avoid dairy and stick to alternatives such as coconut milk and coconut yoghurt.

There is a connection between anti-sperm antibodies and food sensitivities so it is always worth excluding the most common problematic foods namely dairy and gluten. Avoid caffeine, alcohol and smoking, these are all pro-inflammatory. Green Tea is the only form of caffeine advised during preconception and pregnancy. It helps the liver to detoxify and it contains many antioxidants. Green tea also has a minimal amount of caffeine depending on the source. Other natural ways to address immune-related fertility issues include using the following herbs:

- Shatavari can be a good choice if you have immune-related problems and you are trying to conceive. This herb has many health benefits, it helps the body adapt to stress, it can help to regulate oestrogen and it has been shown to prevent miscarriages due to its anti oxytocin effect.
- Dong Quai promotes a more balanced immune response and reduces inflammation. This herb works to support a more healthy stress response so it's also a good herb for mental support.
- Tribulus Terrestris one study found this herb showed a 61% increase in conception in couples with sperm antibodies causing their infertility.^[2] Both men and women can take this herb for increased fertility.
- Withania is a herb that can boost fertility in men and it can balance us during times of increased stress and anxiety. It can also be beneficial to improve thyroid function and reduce adrenal fatigue.
- Curcumin we have already discussed adding more of this herb into your cooking but taking it in a supplement form can be worthwhile too. Curcumin is a natural anti-inflammatory and it has the added benefit of improving platelet aggregation. This will mean your blood is less prone to clotting.

If you have an autoimmune disease ensuring your condition is under control before you fall pregnant is an important part of the process. If your disease has been less active for a 3-6 month time period then this will give you a better chance of getting pregnant and having a problem-free pregnancy. If you are on any

medication always check with your specialist before supplementing with herbs.

References

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[2] Stanislavov, R. & Nikolova, V. Tribulus terrestris and Human Male Fertility: I. Immunological Aspects. *Comptes Rendus de l'Academie Bulgare des Sciences*, vol. 53, p.10:107. 2000

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