

## News flash on hot flashes: Time is best medicine

*My mother just went on hormone replacement therapy because of terrible night sweats and insomnia. I've heard that HRT can cause breast cancer. What do you advise?*

— H.C. in JP



MR. M.D.

Dr. John Abramson

while taking a placebo, meaning nothing but sugar pills.

Here's the downside to taking hormones: The same study showed a 26 percent hike in the risk of breast cancer for women on combined estrogen and progestin hormone therapy (those who have not had a hysterectomy).

This translates to about one extra case of breast cancer for every 1,000 women taking combined hormones each year. In addition, the risk of dementia (such as Alzheimer's) is 75 percent higher for women taking hormones.

For someone like your mother, whose menopausal symptoms are making her miserable, taking a one-in-a-thousand risk of breast cancer each year is probably worth it. But make sure she is on the lowest dose that controls her symptoms. And make sure she gets off HRT as soon as the symptoms disappear.

In addition, I also would suggest that she try several nonprescription remedies. First and foremost, make sure she is getting enough exercise: women who exercise are only

one-fourth as likely to suffer from hot flashes as women who don't.

Alternative remedies, such as soy products and black cohosh, also relieve menopausal symptoms for some women.

You might be wondering why, before the results of the Women's Health Initiative became available, millions of women without any symptoms at all were taking hormones, mistakenly believing this would improve their health when in fact it was doing just the opposite. Forgive the flagrant flogging, but this

fascinating and infuriating story is explained in my book, "Overdosed America."

The bottom line: Less medicine is usually the best medicine.

*Dr. John Abramson teaches at Harvard Medical School and is the author of "Overdosed America." E-mail him at [heraldfea@bostonherald.com](mailto:heraldfea@bostonherald.com); put "Mr. M.D." in the subject field; or send a letter to Mr. M.D., Boston Herald Features, P.O. Box 55843, Boston, MA 02205-5843.*

Your mother's decision to take hormones for her menopausal symptoms is probably wise, at least in the short term. But there are some important things she should know.

The government-sponsored Women's Health Initiative study shows that three out of four women suffering

from hot flashes and night sweats (like your mother) who take hormones for one year get significant relief.

It turns out, however, that it's not the hormones but the passage of time that should get most of the credit: Two out of four women with similar symptoms got as much relief over the course of a year



STAFF PHOTO BY  
FAITH NINIVAGGI  
**RIGHT TO THE POINT:**  
Terry Connell of  
Pathways to Wellness  
gives Natalie Gueris, who  
is seven months along in  
her pregnancy, an  
acupuncture treatment.  
Gueris and her husband  
tried for 18 months  
before conceiving.

# Alternative paths

## Couples turn to acupuncture, holistic medicine in baby bid

By JESSICA HESLAM

Natalie Gueris and her husband tried to get pregnant for 18 months before starting fertility treatments late last year.

But the fertility drug Clomid wreaked havoc on Gueris emotionally and specialists found nothing physically amiss with the couple. The bus and train rides to the clinic during the stormy winter were stressful and after about two months of treatments, the Charlestown couple decided to stop.

During these sessions, Gueris began getting acupuncture after finding a pamphlet on it at the suburban fertility clinic. She later began going to a chiropractor to align her spine. Earlier this year, she started taking Chinese herbs.

Today, Gueris, at age 35, is seven and a half months pregnant.

"The combination of going to a chiropractor, the acupuncture and Chinese herbs helped me get pregnant," said Gueris. "It got my body in order."

With 3 million couples unable to conceive after a year of trying, an increasing number of couples are turning to holistic therapies — many in combination with more traditional infertility treatments.

Next month, Pathways to Wellness plans to launch a program that combines acupuncture and yoga to help women and men with infertility problems.

Women trying to conceive at all stages — from those wanting to reduce stress to those who have been using fertility treatments for years

— have been coming to the Back Bay holistic clinic.

"Every day we get more calls," said Kristen Porter, executive director of Pathways to Wellness.

Studies have shown that acupuncture — the ancient Chinese healing method that involves inserting thin needles into the body — enhances the success rate of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Another recent study found that acupuncture improves the quality of sperm and may help some men overcome sterility problems.

While acupuncture can't repair structural damage, like a damaged fallopian tube, it can work on many different levels for women struggling with infertility, Porter said.

Porter claims it can regulate the menstrual cycle, regulate hormonal

cycles and increase the blood flow to the reproductive organs, which can help support the pregnancy so a woman doesn't miscarry. Acupuncture also balances the endocrine system and reduces stress.

"More and more we're seeing research citing stress and anxiety as a major factor of not being able to conceive," Porter said.

Yoga has also been shown to help with stress and relaxation, Porter said. The center's specialized yoga class will invigorate the energy in the pelvic area, she said.

Terry Connell, an acupuncturist at Pathways, said there was "clear emotional angst" when he first treated Gueris.

"I was focused on balancing the system to make her more relaxed

and at ease. If someone is bound up and frustrated, there's no room for anything to grow," said Connell, who said part of the treatment was geared toward nourishing her uterus.

Gueris, who said fertility clinics are essential for some women, has continued acupuncture and chiropractic throughout her "dream" pregnancy. She hasn't had any morning sickness and says chiropractic can reduce labor time and pain.

"It's really a holistic approach," Gueris said. "It helps you relax and helps your body in every way."

A free orientation to the Fertility Enhancement Program will be held at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 28 at Pathways to Wellness, 142 Berkeley St., 2nd floor, Boston.

[jheslam@bostonherald.com](mailto:jheslam@bostonherald.com)