Effect of acupuncture on women with poor ovarian response: study protocol for a multicenter randomized controlled trial

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DOI: 10.21203/rs.2.16359/v1

SUBJECT AREAS
Maternal & Fetal Medicine

KEYWORDS
Acupuncture, Poor ovarian response, Number of retrieved oocytes, In vitro fertilization-embryo transfer, Randomized controlled trial
Abstract
Background: Poor ovarian response (POR), a manifestation of low ovarian reserve and ovarian aging, leads to a significantly reduced pregnancy rate after in vitro fertilization-embryo transfer (IVF-ET). Acupuncture is effective at improving ovarian reserve. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effect of acupuncture on increasing the number of retrieved oocytes after controlled ovarian hyperstimulation (COH) in women with POR.

Methods: This is a multicenter randomized controlled trial. A total of 140 women with POR will be randomly assigned to receive acupuncture or non-treatment for 12 weeks before COH. The primary outcome will be the number of retrieved oocytes. The secondary outcomes include antral follicle count (AFC), serum level of anti-müllerian hormone (AMH), basal serum levels of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH), luteinizing hormone (LH) and estradiol (E2), the score of the self-rating anxiety scale (SAS), the fertilization rate, the cleavage rate, the available embryo rate and the high-quality embryo rate. The safety of acupuncture will also be assessed.

Discussion: The results of this trial will identify the effectiveness of acupuncture in the treatment of POR. This will provide a new treatment option for POR patients and physicians.

Background
Poor ovarian response (POR) indicates a reduction in follicular response to the controlled ovarian hyperstimulation (COH) during in vitro fertilization (IVF) cycles, resulting in a reduced number of retrieved oocytes [1]. It is believed that approximately 9–24% of women who undergo IVF will show POR during COH [2]. Women with POR usually experience less follicular development in COH cycles, low blood estrogen levels, high dosage of gonadotrophine, high cycle cancellation rates, decreased numbers of retrieved follicles, and low rates of clinical pregnancy [3]. Therefore, POR often leads to an unsatisfactory outcome in assisted reproductive technology (ART), which seriously affects patients’ physical and mental health and their quality of life.

An individualized COH protocol designed according to the assessment of ovarian reserve is the key to the success of POR treatment in the first and multiple cycles. Various protocols of ovarian stimulation, including gonadotrophine-releasing hormone (GnRH) agonist protocols [4], GnRH antagonist protocols
[5] and some nontraditional protocols (micro-stimulation, natural cycles, luteal ovulation, etc.), have been proposed for optimizing ART outcomes; however, it remains challenging for poorly responding women to obtain good responses to COH. To increase the success rate for women undergoing ART, many pretreatment modalities (including growth hormone, estrogen, dehydroepiandrosterone, oral contraceptives, etc.) have been used prior to ovulation induction [6–8], and yet evidences for the effectiveness of these pretreatments are limited [9].

Acupuncture, an important part of traditional Chinese medicine, has gained worldwide popularity on improving the reproductive outcomes for women undergoing ART. Although high quality researches are still needed, increasing evidences have shown that acupuncture is effective at increasing the number of retrieved oocytes [10], improving clinical pregnancy rate and live birth rate [11, 12] and relieving anxiety [13] for women who undergo in vitro fertilization-embryo transfer (IVF-ET). Low ovarian reserve often indicates a poor ovarian response in COH. Although acupuncture has not been studied for POR, its effectiveness in improving ovarian reserve for women with diminished ovarian reserve (DOR) or premature ovarian insufficiency (POI) has been reported. Results of our previous studies showed that acupuncture could significantly lower serum levels of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinizing hormone (LH), raise serum levels of anti-müllerian hormone (AMH) and estradiol (E2), and increase antral follicle count (AFC) for patients with DOR [14, 15] or POI [16]. Acupuncture can also regulate the menstrual cycle and improve perimenopausal symptoms [14, 15].

Given its effect on the improvement of ovarian reserve and ART outcomes, acupuncture is expected to be a new choice for the treatment of POR. Besides, POR patients treated by transcutaneous electrical acupoint stimulation (TEAS), a noninvasive acupuncture-like therapy, showed significant improvement on basal serum sex hormones, AMH, the number of retrieved oocytes and fertilization rate [17, 18], which indirectly indicated the effect of acupuncture for POR. Therefore, we conduct a multicenter, randomized, controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate the effectiveness of acupuncture on women with POR.

Methods

Study design
This is a multicenter RCT comparing acupuncture with non-treatment. A total of 140 women with POR will be recruited from the following 9 hospitals in China: Shanxi Provincial Hospital of Chinese Medicine, Shandong University Reproductive Hospital, Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hospital of the Sun Yat-sen University, Lanzhou University First Hospital, People’s Hospital of Henan Province, Huazhong University of Science and Technology Reproductive Medicine Center of Tongji Medical College, Shanghai Shuguang Hospital, Nanjing General Hospital of Nanjing Military Command, and Luoyang Women and Children Health Care Center. This protocol is in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. It has been approved by the ethics committee of each participating hospital. Written informed consent will be obtained from patients prior to enrolment.

Eligible patients will be randomly assigned to receive acupuncture or non-treatment for 12 weeks, followed by an IVF cycle. Outcomes will be assessed at baseline, after acupuncture or non-treatment intervention, and after the IVF cycle. The flowchart and study design schedule are presented in Figure 1 and Table 1, respectively. This protocol has been registered at the Acupuncture-Moxibustion Clinical Trial Registry (AMCTR-IPR–18000198).

Participants

This trial plans to recruit 140 women with POR from hospitals via poster, network or weChat. Participants will be included if they meet the following criteria: (1) diagnosed as POR according to the Bologna criteria published in 2011 by European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology [1]; (2) age<40 years; (3) a previous POR (≤3 oocytes retrieved in a conventional stimulation protocol); (4) an abnormal ovarian reserve test (i.e., AFC<5–7 follicles or AMH<0.5-1.1 ng/ml) or two episodes of POR after maximal stimulation; (5) suitable for GnRH antagonist protocol judged by physicians of reproductive medicine; (6) voluntarily join the research and sign the informed consent.

Participants will be excluded with any of the following criteria: (1) history of ovarian surgery, radiotherapy or chemotherapy; (2) repeated miscarriages (including biochemical pregnancy) of more than 2 sessions; (3) repeated implantation failure (experienced at least 3 embryo transfer cycles, or not get clinical pregnancy after cumulatively transferring 10 good quality embryos); (4) uterine malformations (unicornate uterus, bicornuate uterus, uterus didelphys, or untreated uterus septus)
and other untreated diseases that can damage endometrial cavity such as adenomyosis, submucous myoma, intrauterine adhesions and scared uterus; (5) abnormal chromosomes of the patient or her husband (except chromosomal polymorphism); (6) untreated hydrosalpinx; (7) patients with contraindications for pregnancy or ART; (8) untreated diseases that can negatively affect pregnancy such as high blood pressure, symptomatic heart disease, diabetes, liver or kidney disease, severe anemia, venous thrombosis, cerebral vascular diseases, and cancer; (9) patients who received acupuncture or moxibustion treatment for POR in the latest 3 months.

**Randomization and masking**

A block randomization stratified by center will be applied in this trial. Eligible participants will be randomly assigned to acupuncture or non-treatment groups in a 1:1 ratio. The random number and group assignment will be obtained by the research assistant in each center via the central randomization system of the Clinical Evaluation Center of the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences. In this study, outcome assessors and statisticians will be blinded to group allocation.

**Interventions**

**Acupuncture protocol**

Patients in the acupuncture group will receive a 12-week acupuncture treatment before COH. Acupuncture will be performed by registered acupuncturists with over 2 years’ experiences. Hwato brand disposable acupuncture needles (size 0.25 × 25 mm, size 0.25 × 40 mm, and size 0.30×75 mm) and SDZ-Ⅲ electroacupuncture apparatuses (Suzhou Medical Appliance Factory, Suzhou, China) will be used.

Acupuncture protocol designed for this trial roots in our clinical practice for improving ovarian function for women with DOR [14]. It consists of two groups of acupoints. Group 1 (in supine position): GV20 (Baihui), GV24 (Shenting), GB13 (Benshen), CV12 (Zhongwan), ST25 (Tianshu), CV4 (Guanyuan), KI12 (Dahe), EX-CA1 (Zigong), SP6 (Sanyinjiao), KI3 (Taixi), LR3 (Taichong); and group 2 (in prone position): BL23 (Shenshu) and BL33(Zhongliao). These two groups of acupoints will be used alternatively with group 1 as the initial treatment. All acupoints will be located according to the World Health Organization Standardized Acupuncture Points Location [19]. A needle depth of 10 to 20 mm
will be applied for GV20, GV24 and GB13 with transverse insertion, and for LR3 with oblique insertion to the direction of KI1 (Yongquan). BL33 will be needled obliquely downward for approximately 60 to 70 mm into the third posterior sacral foramina. The remaining acupoints will be perpendicularly needled for approximately 30 to 40 mm. After insertion, small, equal manipulations of lifting, thrusting or twirling will be performed on all needles (for GV20, GV24 and GB13, twirling only) to reach deqi, a composite of sensations (including soreness, numbness, distention, heaviness, etc) recognized as an essential component for acupuncture effect. In acupuncture with acupoints of group 2, paired electrodes from the electroacupuncture apparatus will be attached transversely to the needle handles at bilateral BL23 and BL33 with a dilatational wave and a current intensity which patients can tolerate (preferably with the skin around the acupoints shivering mildly without pain). Each acupuncture session will last for 20 minutes. Participants will receive 3 sessions of acupuncture per week (ideally every other day) for 12 consecutive weeks, 36 sessions in total.

**Non-treatment control**

Participants in the control group will receive non-treatment for 12 weeks before COH.

**COH regimen**

Participant will start COH with a GnRH antagonist protocol on day 2 or 3 of the menstrual cycle after acupuncture or non-treatment period. GnRH antagonists is commonly used to prevent the premature LH surge which often occurs in poor responders [20,21]. It can induce pituitary suppression within a few hours without a flare-up effect, and the suppression can be released immediately after their discontinuation[22]. Compared with GnRH agonist, GnRH antagonist protocol showed a shorter treatment time, a lower dosage of Gn and a similar clinical pregnancy rate [5]. In this trial, individualized GnRH antagonist protocol will be administered by physicians of reproductive medicine in each center. Given that participants may become suitable for COH before they complete the 12-week acupuncture or non-treatment, an early termination of acupuncture or non-treatment aiming to seize the opportunity to initiate a COH cycle will be allowed on condition that they complete at least 4-week acupuncture treatment (12 sessions of acupuncture) or non-treatment period.

**Permitted and prohibited concomitant treatments**
Participants will be discouraged from taking drugs that may interfere with the assessment of acupuncture effect, including Chinese herbs, Chinese patent medicine, sexual hormones, contraceptives, etc. For any unallowed treatment that has already been used, relevant information should be recorded in patient’s case report form.

Outcome measures
The primary outcome is the number of retrieved oocytes. The secondary outcomes include the assessment of ovarian reserve, other IVF outcomes and the score of the self-rating anxiety scale (SAS). Ovarian reserve will be assessed at baseline and after acupuncture or non-treatment period. It includes AFC and serum levels of AMH, FSH, LH, and E2. AFC (via transvaginal ultrasound) and serum levels of FSH, LH and E2 are required to be measured on day 2 to 5 of the menstrual cycle. AMH can be measured on any day of the menstrual cycle. Other IVF outcomes include fertilization rate, cleavage rate, available embryo rate and high-quality embryo rate. SAS is a self-rating scale for measuring the presence and severity of anxiety [23]. A validated Chinese version of SAS will be used in this trial [24]. It consists of 20 items rated on a 4-point likert scale. When using the scale, participants will be asked to rate each item from 1 to 4 points according to how it applies to them within the past week. The standard score is the sum of the integer part of 1.25 times the raw score (the sum of the 20 items ranging from 20 to 80). The presence of anxiety symptoms is defined as a SAS standard score of greater than 50. A higher score indicates a more serious case of anxiety.

Assessment of safety
Adverse events (AEs) will be appropriately monitored and documented throughout the trial. Acupuncture-related AEs mainly include intolerable needling pain, bleeding after needle withdrawal, hematoma, local infection, etc. AEs related to COH include pain, organ injury, colporrhagia and infection caused by egg retrieval, ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, thrombosis, allergy, etc.

Data management and quality control
A pre-trial training will be done for all participating staff on trial protocol, acupuncture manipulation, usage of the central randomization and data management systems, etc. Double data entry will be applied in this trial to ensure the accuracy of data entering. A three-level-quality control system will
be applied to further improve the trial quality. Regular reminders via WeChat will be used to improve participant compliance. For cases discontinue or deviate from the protocol, causes and relevant outcome data will be recorded in case report form as much as possible.

Statistical methods

Sample size calculation
There are no available clinical studies on the effect of acupuncture for POR. Based on results of a TEAS study on POR [18], we assumed the mean (SD) number of retrieved oocytes is 4.88 (1.84) in the acupuncture group and 3.95 (1.66) in the control group. A sample size of 57 participants per group will be needed to provide 80% power and a two-sided significance level of 5%. Allowing for a 20% dropout rate, 140 participants will be recruited with 70 participants per group.

Statistical analysis
Statistical analysis will be performed by a statistician blinded to group assignments using SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc). All analysis will be based on the intention-to-treat principle. Missing data will be imputed using the multiple imputation method. Continuous data will be presented with mean and standard deviation, or median and interquartile range; categorical data will be presented with number and percentage. Comparisons between groups will be analyzed using the independent t test or Wilcoxon rank-sum test for continuous variables, and chi-square test or Fisher exact test for categorical variables. All statistical tests will be two-sided, and p < 0.05 will be considered statistically significant.

Discussion
This trial is expected to provide convincing evidence that acupuncture can improve follicular response to the COH during IVF cycles for women with POR. Increasing studies have shown that acupuncture could improve ovarian reserve and reproductive outcomes in women undergoing IVF. However, the study population of these trials generally did not focus on women with POR. Up to date, there is only one literature (a study protocol published in 2018) [25] aiming to assess the effect of acupuncture for POR. This trial is the second study using acupuncture for treating POR. Compared with the published POR research [25], this trial will use the same control (non-treatment) and primary outcome (the
number of retrieved oocytes), but different acupuncture protocol and more secondary outcomes to better assess the acupuncture effect for POR. In this trial, non-treatment rather than placebo will be used as control due to the following reasons: placebo acupuncture is difficult to implement [26], and women are usually suggested to rest for 2–3 months between the two IVF cycles in clinical practice. It is worth mentioning that the acupuncture protocol of this trial is a mature protocol which has been used in our clinical practice for more than 8 years, and it was validated to be effective for improving ovarian function [14, 15].

There are some limitations in this trial. We will only include POR women aged under 40 and suitable for GnRH antagonist protocol, which may weaken the representative of the sample. Though rooting in clinical practice, the acupuncture protocol comprising two series of acupoints seems a little sophisticated for a RCT, and it increases the difficulty in implementing a placebo acupuncture. This trial will not assess the effect of acupuncture on the end points of living birth rate or clinical pregnancy rate for POR women due to limitation of short observation period and too much confounding factor during IVF-ET.

In conclusion, results of this trial will show the effect of acupuncture versus non-treatment in increasing number of retrieved oocytes and improving ovarian reserve for women with POR. This study will contribute to the research of acupuncture for POR worldwide via publishing results in a peer-reviewed journal.

Trial status

This trial is currently recruiting participants. The protocol version number and date: V1.0, May 9, 2018. Date of recruitment began: October 1, 2018. Estimated completion date of recruitment: February 29, 2021. Estimated study completion date: October 30, 2021.

List Of Abbreviations

POR: poor ovarian response; COH: controlled ovarian hyperstimulation; IVF: in vitro fertilization; ART: assisted reproductive technology; GnRH: gonadotrophine-releasing hormone; IVF-ET: in vitro fertilization-embryo transfer; DOR: diminished ovarian reserve; POI: premature ovarian insufficiency; FSH: follicle stimulating hormone; LH: luteinizing hormone; AMH: anti-müllerian hormone; E2:
estradiol; AFC: antral follicle count; TEAS: transcutaneous electrical acupoint stimulation; RCT: randomized controlled trial; SAS: self-rating anxiety scale; AEs: adverse events.

**Declarations**

**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

This trial will be performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and has been approved by ethics committees of all the participating centers. Written informed consent will be obtained from patients prior to enrolment. The name of the ethics committee and the reference number were listed as follows:

- Ethics committee (EC) of Institute of Acupuncture and Moxibustion, China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences (2018-05-21-1);
- EC of Shanxi Provincial Hospital of Chinese Medicine (AF/SC-04/01);
- EC of Reproductive Hospital Affiliated to Shandong University (2018-05-21-1);
- EC of Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hospital of the Sun Yat-sen University (2019-28);
- EC of the first Hospital Affiliated to Lanzhou University (2018-05-21-1);
- EC of reproductive medicine of Henan Provincial People’s Hospital (SYZ-LL-2019012411);
- EC of Reproductive Medicine Center of Tongji Medical College Affiliated to Huazhong University of Science and Technology (2018-05);
- EC of Shanghai Shuguang Hospital (2018-05-21-1);
- EC of Nanjing General Hospital of Nanjing Military Command (2018-05-21-1);
- EC of Luoyang Women and Children Health Care Center (2018-05-21-1).

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

**Availability of data and materials**

Not applicable.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Funding**
This study was supported by the National key research and development program (NO. 2017YFC1703600) by the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People’s Republic of China. The funder has no role in the design of the study and collection, analysis, and interpretation of data and in writing the manuscript.

Authors’ contributions

YGF and BYL conceived and designed the study protocol. HFX and CSZ drafted the manuscript. HFX completed the trial registration. HFX and CSZ and substantively revised the manuscript. LYH and HSY designed statistical plan. TSS, HDW, YL, YB, GQT, LC, FZ, CZ, CLZ, YQY, MZH and LY participated in data acquisition and provided administrative, technical, or material support. All authors have read and approved the submitted version of this manuscript and agreed both to be personally accountable for their own contributions and to ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

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Tables
Table 1. Study design schedule

| Period       | Screening | Baseline | Intervention | COH |
|--------------|-----------|----------|--------------|-----|
| Week (W)     |           | W0       | W12          | W14 |
| Informed consent | ×        |          |              |     |
| Eligibility   | ×         |          |              |     |
| Demography and medical history | ×        |          |              |     |
| AFC          | ×         | ×        |              |     |
| Serum level of AMH | ×        | ×        |              |     |
| Basal serum levels of FSH, LH and E2 | ×        | ×        |              |     |
| Score of SAS | ×         | ×        |              |     |
| Number of retrieved oocytes | ×        |          |              |     |
| Number of fertilized oocytes | ×        |          |              |     |
| Number of cleavage    | ×        |          |              |     |
| Number of available embryos | ×        |          |              |     |
| Number of high-quality embryos | ×        |          |              |     |
| AEs           | ×         | ×        | ×            |     |
| Compliance    | ×         | ×        | ×            |     |

AFC, antral follicle count; AMH, anti-müllerian hormone; FSH, follicle stimulating hormone; LH, luteinizing hormone; E2, estradiol; SAS, self-rating anxiety scale; AEs, adverse events.

Figures
Women with POR

Screening for eligibility

Previous ART; ovarian reserve tests; score of SAS, etc.

Eligible POR women (n=140)

Central randomization

Acupuncture (n=70)

Non-treatment (n=70)

Ovarian reserve tests; Score of SAS

AFC; serum levels of AMH, FSH, LH, E2

Discontinued cases and reasons

COH

number of retrieved oocytes, fertilization rate, cleavage rate, available embryo rate and high-quality embryo rate

IVF outcomes

statistical analysis

Figure 1

Trial flow chart

Supplementary Files
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