



A HELPFUL GUIDE TO

Acupuncture and Moxibustion
for Breech and Transverse Babies

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Acupuncture and moxibustion have been used for centuries in traditional East Asian Medicine to help babies find a good position for birth and to turn breech and transverse presentations.

Both midwives and physicians refer pregnant people to acupuncturists prior to trying stronger interventions such as an ECV (External Cephalic Version). In the hands of a well-trained provider, acupuncture and moxibustion are safe, gentle and effective at helping babies into a head down position within just a few days of treatment.

In this guide you'll find a bit more information about the methods, research, contraindications and best practices related to using acupuncture and moxibustion for breech and transverse babies.

METHODS AND COURSE OF TREATMENT

Many people are surprised to learn that the most useful acupuncture point to turn babies is on the outside of the little toe at a point called Zhi Yin or Bladder 67. Traditionally, heat in the form of a moxa stick (a cigar-like stick made with the herb Ai Ye / Mugwort) is gently applied to the point once or twice daily for 15 - 20 minutes.

Pregnant people with breech babies generally come in for one treatment between 32 and 36 weeks of pregnancy. Acupuncture is used to relax the muscles and create space in the pelvis and moxa is applied to Urinary Bladder 67. The treatment is comfortable and painless and often babies will respond immediately by making big movements as soon as the needles are inserted.

The pregnant person is then sent home with their own moxa sticks along with instructions for continuing the moxa treatment. In rare cases, babies will turn immediately after the pregnant person stands up after treatment! More often, babies will turn in the following days and be discovered to be cephalic (head down) at their next primary care prenatal visit. Sometimes a second acupuncture treatment is required. And sometimes, babies will not turn with this method. If treatment is not effective, an ECV is still an option.

In addition to acupuncture and moxibustion, some pregnant people may also receive guidance on positional exercises, chiropractic and/or pelvic PT to help encourage the baby to turn. All of these methods can work harmoniously alongside acupuncture and moxibustion.

RESEARCH AND GUIDELINES

Studies on the use of moxibustion for breech have been limited and of inconsistent design. As with many forms of traditional medicine, which by their nature are highly individualized to the unique presentation of the patient, acupuncture and moxibustion treatment are challenging to standardize into Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs).

However, a 2023 Cochrane Review (Coyle et al) found that moxibustion plus usual care probably increases the number of head down babies at birth over usual care alone. Moxibustion plus usual care probably also reduces the need for oxytocin before and during labor.

In addition, in 2017 moxibustion and acupuncture were added to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (RCOG) Green-top Guidelines for ECV and Reducing the Incidence of Term Breech Presentation. The guidelines cite several studies showing this treatment can increase the number of cephalic babies at term and reduce the need for cesarean sections.

What is most reassuring is that in all studies, adverse outcomes for this type of treatment are limited or even non-existent in uncomplicated pregnancies. Acupuncture and moxibustion for breech and transverse babies is a safe option in the hands of a well-trained provider.

RISK FACTORS AND CONTRAINDICATIONS

There are some instances when acupuncture and moxibustion may be contraindicated in assisting babies to turn. These may include:

- Oligohydramnios and Polyhydramnios
- History of vaginal bleeding in pregnancy
- Known fetal abnormalities or growth issues
- History of PROM or premature labor
- Gestational diabetes
- Hypertension
- Placenta previa
- Bicornate uterus
- Twins or other non-singleton pregnancy
- Any concern in which ECV is contraindicated by the primary care provider.

HOW TO FIND A PROVIDER

Most acupuncturists receive some very limited training in obstetrics in school, however working in this specialty safely and effectively requires additional post-graduate training. When choosing an acupuncturist, ask questions about what type of post-graduate education and experience they have in treating pregnant people. Often, local midwives, doulas and physicians will be familiar with acupuncturists who specialize in perinatal health and who are qualified to help. There are also some midwives, doulas and herbalists who may have received some training in the application of moxibustion for helping babies to turn.

In choosing any provider make sure they are aware of the methods, safety concerns and contraindications to using moxibustion. Practitioners should also provide thorough instructions and support to the pregnant person for home moxa use.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND RESOURCES

- Research summary by Susan Wallmeyer L.Ac and Sarah Tewhey L.Ac on Acupuncture and Moxibustion for Breech Presentation <https://www.nychi-acupuncture.com/topic/moxa-for-breech-presentation/>
- Maternity Acupuncture Mentoring and Peer Support (MAMPS) provides high quality post-graduate education in perinatal. Visit <https://www.mamps.org/> for further information on postgraduate training as well as safety guidelines for breech and moxibustion.
- The Obstetrical Acupuncture Association (OBAA) provides a resource for both pregnant people and their care providers to find acupuncturists in their area who demonstrate an elevated standard of care and safety within the field of perinatal care. They can be found at <https://ob-acupuncture.com/>
- 2023 Cochrane Review on Cephalic Version by moxibustion for Breech Presentation. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD003928.pub4
- RCOG's Green-top Guideline for External Cephalic Version and Reducing the Incidence of Term Breech Presentation.
<https://obgyn.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1471-0528.14466>
- Feel free to reach out to me via email for questions or more information.