



PWE15: Improving Fertility with Endometriosis

Aubree: Welcome to the Peace With Endo Podcast. My name's Aubree Deimler. I am an author, speaker and integrative wellness coach who helps women with endometriosis naturally manage pain, increase energy and find Peace with Endo. This is episode number 15 and I'm super excited on the show today we have Dr. Caleigh Sumner. She's a fellow endo sister and amazing naturopathic doctor who delivers solutions for a variety of reproductive concerns in Ontario, Canada. Hi, Caleigh. Thanks for being here.

Caleigh: Hi Aubree. Thanks so much for having me I'm excited to chat with you this morning.

Aubree: So, tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Caleigh: As you mentioned I am a naturopathic doctor. I'm practicing here in Toronto, Canada, but I do see patients online in a one-on-one setting totally individualized, and my primary focus with naturopathic medicine is fertility, supporting fertility and treating infertility, and a large majority of my patient population is those with endometriosis, which I love treating because I too have endometriosis so I know what it's like but it can be an extremely frustrating barrier to getting pregnant, and unfortunately it's one of the top two reasons for female infertility.

Aubree: So tell us a little bit more about your journey with endo, and how you landed where you're at now, how you got into being a naturopath.

Caleigh: Sure. There's sort of two parts to my story, I would say. I found out about naturopathic medicine through my mom, because she has endometriosis and she had a lot of trouble getting pregnant and after five or six years she found a naturopathic doctor and she was like you know what I'm just going to give this a shot. Let's see what happens and she revolutionized her life with herbs and supplements, diet, life style, weekly acupuncture and then my mom and dad were able to get pregnant and I have two brothers.

So, naturopathic medicine was really their answer and their savior and so I grew up with naturopathic medicine and I also grew up knowing that I would likely be getting endometriosis one day and my mom always prepared me for it. She was very vocal about it, and so I started getting symptoms in high school, and right away I was using natural strategies. Instead of using pain medication I was learning

breathing techniques and I was taking different herbs, and there's always a place, always a place for pain medications, but I'm so thankful to have had that foundation at such a young age, that now I have all these different tools in my tool kit, and so I do use for my own approach a Western and Eastern type medicine so I still see a medical doctor. I still have my gyne and I use her suggestions, but I also use all naturopathic medicine as well. So, it's a nice balance and I have lots of resources for myself, which I'm really thankful for.

Aubree: That's awesome. So, do you have any tips, like when people have pain. Do you have any go-to's for that?

Caleigh: Yes. Yes. That's a good question I get asked that a lot, and I know that pain is primarily the focus for all of us, but it really does come down to lifestyle and diet, which we can talk about later, but let's talk about pain, just in general I would say we all need a really high quality anti-inflammatory, like a fish oil or a curcumin, a really high quality anti-oxidant, like pycnogenol or ECGC or Aces and Zinc, and then a really high quality, all high quality as you can see, proteolytic enzyme like NAC or serrapeptase and I find with that combination can really help manage the pain. So, start it preemptively so if you have pain twenty days out of the cycle I would be taking it every day, but if you only have pain leading up to your period and during your period you could take it during those times.

Aubree: So, I think that's amazing that you grew up with these ideals from your mother. So, kudos to her for passing that down to you.

Caleigh: She's pretty cool.

Aubree: And I love that, you know, she was able to use this holistic way to get pregnant, and to have you.

Caleigh: Yes.

Aubree: So, that's amazing as well. So, let's talk a little bit about some of those fertility challenges, because I know that's common with ladies with endo.

Caleigh: Yes. It all depends on the person and I think the medical community. We've all sort of accepted that endometriosis is an autoimmune condition, but I see different what I like to call archetypes in practice, different symptomatology. So I'll see some women presenting with endometriosis but with a very estrogen dominant picture. I'll see some women with really no estrogen dominance but some systemic inflammation or gut inflammation or women who have had several successful laparoscopic surgeries but there's lots of scarring and adhesions. So, I'm meeting my patients where they are and it does depend on your specific symptoms with endometriosis and getting to the root cause. That's always the base of naturopathic medicine, the root cause of your picture and then going from there.

Aubree: Love that, and I think that's often what's missed unfortunately in conventional medicine, is we go after the symptoms instead of really getting to that root cause.

Caleigh: Exactly and it's always going to be different for each woman and although, although lifestyle and diet makes a big difference the basis is the autoimmune and so we do need extra support with that some times.

Aubree: Absolutely, and that's always been my approach as well has been addressing the immune system. So, strengthening that up. Do you have any tips for strengthening up your immune system?

Caleigh: Yeah. I think the best approach for immune system is diet, which I know that you do amazingly well and have an awesome program, just because diet can be so individualized and so specific and support the immune system. So different foods are inflammatory, different foods are going to activate our immune system and that's going to be different for everyone. So, the common culprits are gluten and dairy and nightshade vegetables, but that doesn't have to be the case for everyone, but from an immune perspective I always go to diet first.

Aubree: So, what are some natural support strategies that you recommend for ladies that want to improve their fertility?

Caleigh: Great question. So, before doing any treatment I always have my patients get really comfortable with their cycle, knowing everything about their cycle and that's one of the sort of blessings in disguise with endometriosis is you really get to know your symptoms well and your periods well because you're preemptively treating yourself and maybe you're planning your whole life around your cycle. So you do get to know it well, but the most important thing for fertility is knowing when you ovulate. Despite having any other underlying condition and so I always have my patients use basal body temperature tracking. Have you ever tried it?

Aubree: I have. Yes I do that every, every day.

Caleigh: It's such a fantastic tool not only for measuring ovulation, which is going to be important for pregnancy, but I use it as a tool to determine hormone levels as well. Are you making enough progesterone to support a pregnancy? Is your estrogen level too high? Sometimes it's even too low with endometriosis, which is surprising, and if your hormones are not high enough in the beginning part of your cycle, the pre-ovulatory phase, you might not ovulate. So, it's such a fantastic tool. So anyone who comes to me saying I have endometriosis. I want to try getting pregnant. I always start off with that. Let's just see what your cycle looks like and go from there. It's nice to have some diagnostic information before we get started.

Aubree: And I know for me, and a lot of ladies that I connect with that we've been on some type of hormone treatment, whether that be birth control pills, or you know, whatever you've been prescribed.

Caliegh: Yes.

Aubree: Do you see ladies like that, getting off of those types of things?

Caliegh: Yes. I include myself in that as well with all the hormones. So, if you're coming off of hormones and getting ready for pregnancy, endometriosis is unique because the purpose of the hormones is to suppress the growth of the endometriomas so you want to be on it for as long as possible if it's working for you and that's not the case for all women but if it's working for you, stay on it, and then three months before trying you can stop taking it and the rule of thumb for general women is that every year you've been on birth control, it'll take that number of months to get a regular cycle. So if you've been on birth control for 12 years, it's going to take 12 months, or a year for you to have a regular cycle, but when it comes to endometriosis they say to stay on it until you are no longer getting any relief or until you want to get pregnant and then give yourself three months to get that regular cycle again.

Aubree: And I know that can cause some symptoms when you're getting off of it. Do you have any advice for kind of making that transition?

Caliegh: Yes. Although lifestyle factors are going to help I've found the best results switching from those synthetic hormones to doing herb support. So right when you come off it, depending on your hormonal picture, using supportive herbs, and the herbs are always going to change depending on where you are in your cycle. So we'll use a different set of herbs for women pre-ovulatory, post-ovulatory and then during menstruation and this sort of tricks your body into developing a regular cycle and supporting your body's natural hormone levels so that you, it takes less time to get a regular cycle and you can start conceiving sooner.

Aubree: And do you find that ladies that have been doing the hormonal treatments is there a correlation there with having lower amounts of their natural hormones with the estrogen and progesterone, lower levels coming off the pill?

Caliegh: Yes. Absolutely. They are suppressed, which is a good thing, a good thing for endometriosis, but it takes a little bit, about three months to get those levels back up again, but I do notice with women that have been on synthetic hormones the, the scarring is not as bad, which is one of the leading issues with endometriosis and infertility is that every time we have a period and those endometriomas, endometriomas are growing and then there's scarring and there's shrinking and we get these adhesions and so for women who have been on birth control for longer, I see less of that, along with lots of other side effects that come with birth control, but that's one of the benefits.

Aubree: Awesome. So, it sounds like you know diet, herbs are kind of main, is that mainly what you focus on or is there any other support that you offer ladies?

Caleigh: Acupuncture.

Aubree: Acupuncture. Awesome.

Caleigh: I could not recommend acupuncture enough wherever you are if you can find a fertility specialist, an acupuncture fertility specialist, go see them and go for acupuncture once a week and this can be done while you're still on birth control but thinking about starting to conceive, or it can be done if you're not on synthetic hormones at all, but ideally the three month time period, if you can do acupuncture once a week is incredible, not only for pain management, but inducing ovulation and supporting uterine lining for implantation, managing stress, it has a whole host of benefits. So, I'm always using acupuncture along side herbs and supplements and diet.

Aubree: That's great. I've heard a lot of good things about acupuncture as well.

Caleigh: Yes. I was listening to your podcast and there was someone a few weeks ago talking about how acupuncture really changed her life and now she's into an energetic approach, which is incredible. I love to hear those stories.

Aubree: Absolutely, and I think there is such a big role with that energy side of things. Have you noticed any trends with that with endo?

Caleigh: Yes. I start to see and with acupuncture everyone gets what we call a Traditional Chinese Medicine diagnosis and so sometimes I'll see patients and they'll say well I went to this fertility clinic and they couldn't give me a diagnosis and they told me that nothing's wrong and they say I have endometriosis but there's nothing else and they can't explain why I'm not getting pregnant. There's always an explanation when it comes to Chinese medicine and so once we come up with that individualized diagnosis, there's specific acupuncture points for those women and I start to see a lot of the same diagnosis with endometriosis, lots of stagnation. The energy doesn't really flow, because of course we're all focusing so much on our uterus and our pelvis because it's such a focus point for us. There's a lot of pain, there's a lot of emotions there and we store them, and so we call that stagnation and with acupuncture you can start to break down that stagnation and get better energy flow.

Aubree: And I've heard ladies having success like with acupuncture and people that are going maybe more of the IVF route. Maybe they've tried for a long time and are kind of to that point. Do you get some of those ladies as well and how can acupuncture fit in with that?

Caleigh: Absolutely. I would say my practice is 50/50 and I'm, I'm seeing patients wherever they are on their journey sometimes they're just thinking about conceiving, but when it comes to acupuncture and IVF, the research is very specific and really fantastic results, so my recommendation if you're going through an IVF procedure, and you're already on stimulating medications, your follicle stimulating meds, I would recommend doing acupuncture twice a week. So, for the first two weeks that you're on stimulating medications, twice a week acupuncture, so that'll give you four treatments and I see better results with women that are just taking stimulating medications versus women that are doing stimulating meds with acupuncture I see more follicular development. So, more eggs can be retrieved when you add acupuncture to the mix.

Aubree: Awesome and are you seeing good results with your patients with the acupuncture?

Caleigh: Yes. Yes. Among other things, but I do have patients that really aren't interested in taking anything, they just want to have the acupuncture treatment and relax for 30 minutes twice a week and it works beautifully. I also recommend for IVF, if you're doing a transfer, whether it's a frozen or a fresh transfer, doing acupuncture on the same day of that transfer. So, getting a treatment before and after is fantastic and I do that a lot. I'll meet patients at fertility clinics, so they don't have to travel and so hopefully wherever you are you can find an acupuncturist who's willing to do that for you, and it helps with implantation. Yeah. Lots of really cool things with acupuncture.

Aubree: Do you have anything specifically that's good to eat if you want to improve fertility?

Caleigh: Yes. Let's talk about foods that increase pelvic blood flow. I like to recommend them all of the time, and these are foods that are specific. They contain nitric oxide, which is a component that dilates your blood vessels, and so when we have stagnation in our uterus with lots of scarring, we need adequate blood flow, and so foods that contain nitric oxide are walnuts, dark chocolate, like a 70% or above if you can tolerate 100% dark, all the power to you, pomegranates, citrus fruits like lemon, grapefruit, orange and then drinking sufficient amounts of water, so two liters a day. Those are my favorite fertility foods, whether it's for endometriosis or a thin lining or pain and stagnation, really helpful.

Aubree: Excellent. I love the dark chocolate recommendation. I'm sure I'm not the only one who will love that.

Caleigh: It's so good for everyone.

Aubree: I've heard that it can actually reduce cortisol levels as well.

Caleigh: Yes and it's a great antioxidant. It's so beneficial. So we should just enjoy it.

Aubree: Stress management obviously is huge when it comes to fertility, right? So, we have acupuncture. Do you have any other suggestions that you give ladies as far as how to manage stress?

Caleigh: Mindfulness, which I think you've talked about on your podcast already. I, I see this cycle where we're all afraid to be stressed which stress us out even more and it's so difficult to manage those sort feelings especially when endometriosis, there's lack of control. We have lack of control of our bodies and then that is exacerbated when you're trying to get pregnant because you want to regain that control and you don't have it, so mindful activities and I know that sometimes that that can scare my patients, like oh I can't meditate for 30 minutes, or I can't just sit and be still. My mind is racing and so I recommend mindfulness to just be anything that feels good to you even if that's when you're driving in the car, you're taking a few deep breaths at a red light, or when you're brushing your teeth you're thinking about just brushing your teeth and making sure that you get all of your teeth. It doesn't have to be this really scary large exercise. It can be small thirty second to one minute activities and then it can develop into something longer that then you can take into your endo journey and use when you're in pain or use when you're going through an IVF procedure.

Aubree: Love that. I love that you brought up stressing about the stress.

Caleigh: Yes! It's so impossible not to. Stress is Ok. I'm always saying that a little bit of stress is Ok as long as it motivates you, and it empowers you, and it makes you focus on things that matter. That's healthy stress, but it's unhealthy stress when it starts taking over your life and it's no longer productive and you really don't want to get out of bed, and you don't have motivation to do things. That's when it crosses the line. That little bit of stress is Ok.

Aubree: Right. So, I love that you brought that up because I think, you know, I've struggled with fertility myself for years, and I know it can come with a lot of emotions, and I think, you know, that's just a reminder that it's Ok to feel those emotions. It's Ok to feel everything that comes along with this because it can get very frustrating. So, definitely finding ways to implement joy into your life, I think is huge as well.

Caleigh: Absolutely. I could not agree more. Even if it's writing down a list of all the things that make you happy and trying to do a few of those every day.

Aubree: Right, and I think you can still, you know, stimulate that energy of creation that you're trying to get going into your uterus, but by doing, you know, other outside creative activities. You're kind of getting that energy flow moving.

Caleigh: That's a fantastic point. Yes. I remember my mom telling me that she got really into crochet and basket weaving when she was trying to get pregnant. So, any sort of craft that keeps you busy, that you enjoy. That's a great point.

With fertility the first questions that I ask are always just about general lifestyle and nothing to do with when you ovulate or when your period is. Making sure that you get optimal sleep, making sure that you have outlets for stress management, making sure that you have things in your life that you love doing, making sure that you go to the bathroom every day. These sorts of things are overlooked when we have endometriosis, because they're not a priority. We're trying to manage our pain, but they really are when it comes to overall health, and even more so when getting pregnant. So, really a holistic approach.

Aubree: So, after you know struggling with your own journey maybe or you know having endometriosis and now becoming a leader as a naturopath helping other women. What have you learned? Like what's your biggest take away that you have to share with our listeners here?

Caleigh: I would say my biggest take away is that it's Ok to be vulnerable. I put a lot of pressure on myself, because I have endometriosis and yet I'm a naturopathic doctor, like I should be curing my own endometriosis. I should be curing everyone of their endometriosis, but that's just not reality, and it's all about improving quality of life, and sometimes I have bad days and sometimes I have bad months and so I'm learning slowly that it's Ok to be vulnerable and it's Ok to not feel so great some times, you know, just because I'm a doctor doesn't mean that I always have to be completely whole and completely healthy there's going to be some bad moments and so if everyone out there who has endo could take that it. It's Ok to be vulnerable and it's Ok to feel how you're feeling, and not want to get out of bed that day. It's Ok and you're not alone. That's for sure.

Aubree: Love that. It's Ok to rest too, right?

Caleigh: Yeah. Yes. That's what we need. Absolutely.

Aubree: Take care. Make sure to take care of yourself especially if you are like Caleigh and you're in that service industry, because I know that comes up with me as well. You want to give and help, but it's so important too to take care of yourself, and make space for yourself.

Caleigh: Absolutely. See, if you're in the health care field see your colleagues, see your friends and allow them to support you too.

Aubree: Absolutely. Well thank you so much for coming on and sharing some of your wisdom with us today. It was very helpful.

Caleigh: Thank you so much for having me.

Aubree: How can our listeners connect with you further?

Caleigh: The best thing would be my website, which is caleighsumner.com. I have lots of blogs on there and links to my social media. I do have an online endometriosis program. It's unique. It's totally individualized, because it's one-on-one. So, there's no. There's no group activities. It's just me and you. Weekly visits focusing on what to focus on in your life so you can check that out on my web site as well.

Aubree: Awesome and do you just see people in Canada or are you....

Caleigh: No everywhere. Online is everywhere, of course in person is only going to be in Canada or you'd have to drive a long way, but my online I do Skype and Zoom visits, just one-on-one wherever you are in the world.

Aubree: Awesome. And I'll make sure to include links to your site in the show notes for those that do want to connect with Caleigh further.

Caleigh: Oh that's fabulous. Thank you.

Aubree: And thank you again for being on the show today. I appreciate it.

Caleigh: Thank you so much Aubree.

Aubree: If you found this episode to be helpful I invite you to subscribe to continue on the journey. If you want to connect with me further you can find me at peacewithendo.com or on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @peacewithendo. I hope that you find some peace in your day today. Sending you so much love. Bye for now.

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