

# Hindu View of Stem Cell Research

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## Background

Use of adult-derived stem cells, from blood, cord blood, skin and other tissues, known as iPSC's has been demonstrated to be effective for treating different diseases in animal models. Umbilical-cord-derived stem cells (obtained from the cord blood) have also been isolated and utilized for various experimental treatments. Another option is use of uniparental stem cells. Although these cells lines have some disadvantages or shortcomings compared to embryonic cell lines (they are shorter-lived), there is vast potential if enough money is invested in researching them further, and they are not technically considered individual living beings by pro-life advocates.

Use of embryonic stem cells for research involves the destruction of blastocysts<sup>1</sup> formed from laboratory-fertilized human eggs. For those who believe that life begins at conception, the blastocyst is a human life and to destroy it is unacceptable and immoral. This seems to be the only controversial issue standing in the way of stem cell research in North America.

## A Hindu Position

Hinduism does not possess and body of immutable laws from a Creator and as such entertains a wide range of opinions based on some basic ethical guidelines. Every Hindu guru will espouse a different take on the subject and there is no central authority to propound an "official" position.

The Garbha Upanishad is a sacred text which deals with embryology as conceived by the ancients. According to this text the Jiva (consciousness) enters into the foetus in the 7<sup>th</sup> month. This doctrine is no doubt based on the natural observation that a foetus born before the 7<sup>th</sup> month cannot possibly survive and those born after the 7<sup>th</sup> month can, with intensive care, survive. But most babies born in the 7<sup>th</sup> month die.

Other teachers of Ayurveda claim that the baby is conscious from the fourth/fifth month when the baby is fully developed and begins moving.

According to the Gitā

*dehino'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṃ yauvanaṃ jarā |*

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### <sup>1</sup> Definition of a blastocyst

- An embryo that has developed for five to seven days after fertilization and has 2 distinct cell types and a central cavity filled with fluid (blastocoel cavity)
- The cells in a blastocyst have just started to differentiate
- The surface cells that surround the cavity (just under the outer shell) are called the trophectoderm and will later develop into the placenta
- A more centrally located group of cells - the inner cell mass, will become the fetus

*tathā dehāntara prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati || 13 ||*

2:13. Just as the embodied Self passes through childhood, youth and old age [pertaining to that body], so [at death] it passes into another body. A wise man is not confused thereby.

So from this verse we can deduce that until the baby is fully formed in about the fourth month it is not a suitable receptacle for a jiva.

So there is no spiritual or religious reason from a Hindu point of view to object to the destruction of blastocysts formed from laboratory-fertilized human eggs.

The ultimate judgement of whether an act is virtuous or unvirtuous is the intention behind it. The fertilization of human eggs in a laboratory is done for the benefit of the many and is therefore a virtuous act and no one is harmed thereby.



Blastocyst at day 5

16 weeks



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20 weeks



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