

Acupuncture

WHAT IS ACUPUNCTURE AND WHAT CAN IT TREAT?

Acupuncture is an essential part of Traditional Oriental Medicine, a comprehensive system of health care with a continuous clinical history of over 3000 years. Oriental medicine includes acupuncture, Chinese herbology and bodywork, dietary therapy and exercise based on traditional Oriental medicine principles. These therapies work with Qi, the natural vital energy inherent within all living things, to promote the body's ability to heal itself. I often find myself explaining Qi by saying that it is the unknowable entity that which makes you different from a piece of furniture. You are alive; the table is not. This Qi flows along specific pathways called Meridians. Each pathway is associated with a particular physiological system and internal organ. Disease arises due to an imbalance or a deficiency in the meridians and their associated physiological signs and symptoms. Acupuncture points are specific locations along these meridians, and each acupuncture point has specific effects and energetics.

With such an extensive history, acupuncture can treat a great deal more than just aches and sprains. Of primary importance to performers would be disorders of muscles, bones, joints and the nervous system such as arthritis, tendonitis, neck and shoulder pain, bursitis, migraines, back pain, sciatica and neuralgia. Are you getting adequate rest? How is your energy level? Acupuncture also treats insomnia, and emotional and psychological disorders including depression, irritability, and anxiety.

Are you anorexic or overweight? It can help gastrointestinal disorders such as diarrhea and constipation as well as digestive complaints and urogenital disorders including stress incontinence, urinary tract infections and sexual dysfunction.

Do you use your voice in your work? As you have noticed in previous columns, Oriental Medicine treats respiratory disorders like the common cold/ flu, allergies, asthma, bronchitis, and ear/ nose and throat problems like laryngitis, as well as circulatory disorders such as hypertension, anemia and chest pain. Let's not forget gynecological disorders such as irregular, heavy or painful menstruation, infertility in women and men, and PMS.

Addictions such as alcohol, smoking, drugs, and overeating can also be addressed successfully with acupuncture. As you can see, the scope of what acupuncture can treat is enormous and encouraging. Of course, as in any form of healing, your own attitude, diet, determination and lifestyle will affect the course of treatment, so I always encourage you to actively participate in your healing process.

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HOW ACUPUNCTURE WORKS?

In spite of thousands of years of evidence in China, a lot of westerners seem to think that acupuncture only works "if you believe in it". Well, I'm here to tell you otherwise. And I am thrilled because recently the front page of TCM World newspaper heralded a study done by a Dr. Kathleen Hui at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. She and her colleagues have established unequivocally that acupuncture affects the deep structures of the brain that go powerfully beyond just the release of endorphins and all other explanations so far.

How is this possible? You may ask. Dr. Hui has used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) signals together with acupuncture needle manipulation to show how acupuncture calms the brain. Her study shows a signal decrease in the part of the limbic system called the amygdala. This is the deep seat of emotions, the most primitive part of the brain, which is formed embryonically even before the cerebellum or the cerebral hemispheres. It is an area of central brain connections regulating pain and emotions. It has close connections to areas of the brain that regulate neurohormones. This means that all those primitive responses like fear and hunger, thirst, panic, and all the basic emotions are activated here. It also sets the base level for satisfaction and satiety.

So the signal decrease seen in the nuclear MRI shows a modulating or calming effect on these states. Think of acupuncture as anti-stress and anti-pain. And isn't that what we are looking for when we turn to acupuncture to treat pain? Not just a general feel-good therapy, but also western scientific proof of how pain is reduced and dispersed.

Needle Fear !!

When people in the West think of Oriental Medicine they often imagine the most foreign aspect to them, namely acupuncture. But Acupuncture is but one of ten different modalities that we incorporate; it is, however, a powerful and important support to the other modalities.

I spend a lot of time helping a patient to feel comfortable. If it's your first time, I will show you what acupuncture needles look like and I will take the time to explain that they are not like the flying weapon needles that you might have seen in the movies --- Needles flying through the air was creative in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon", but it was as fictional as flying up to the rooftops. The needles I use are as fine as three strands of human hair. Some people never feel the insertion of such slender needles, while others may feel a small pinch followed by a sensation of tingling or traveling warmth as the needles stimulate and rebalance the vital energy of the body. I often talk about why I chose particular acupuncture points and what they do in terms of energetic. I want my patients to feel safe. Why? Because I want them feel they have some control over their destiny. This is different from being a victim. They have been in pain long enough. I encourage my patients to participate in their own healing process.

Also, particular foods can help strengthen their healing process, and so I talk about when they eat as well as what and how we combine foods. Some food combinations that are common in America do a lot more harm than good. We cannot draw nutritional value from empty sweets.

Above all, I find that it is important to enjoy the process of your own healing. And it is fun. It opens possibilities for a more vibrant life. Participate in it! Smile as you learn how to feel better.

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WHAT HAPPENS DURING A CONSULTATION ?

Perhaps you have a physical or psychological condition that someone has told you might respond to acupuncture; but you've never been to an acupuncturist before, and you're worried-- or at least skeptical and concerned about what is involve. Going to see an acupuncturist is usually a very different experience from consulting a Western doctor, both in terms of what the consultation involves and the basis of approach. Chinese medicine follows the holistic principle that no one symptom can be viewed in isolation. Illness results when something is out of balance between a person's mind and body, diet and exercise, lifestyle and relationships, work and leisure, achievements and problems. Ill -health is a result of imbalance or disharmony in the individual, and is not necessarily physical. Based on this philosophy, a comprehensive picture of the patient is painstakingly built up by the doctor in order to treat the whole person, not just the disease. Organs are viewed according to their perceived functions, rather than the literal functions assigned by western medicine.

By contrast, allopathic medicine (the conventional western treatment offered by your general practitioner) adopts a more symptomatic approach. It combats ill health with drugs that have an oppositional effect-- for example; painkillers are used for an aching back. So if Mr. Smith has a stomach ulcer, an allopathic doctor will focus solely on the disease and its symptoms. In Chinese Medicine, however, Mr. Smith's ulcer would be regarded as a reflection of a disharmony in Mr. Smith as a whole, and treatment would focus on figuring out why he is secreting too much stomach acid or finding the source of the bacteria causing the ulcer. So first we gather information by asking questions, not only to gather details and background to your problem, but also to see how you present yourself, hear your tone of voice and observe the colors of your skin and your emotions. Then we will take your pulses, feeling the quality of the qi to collect more information. The tongue also is a map of your internal systems and gives insight. Often by the time I observe your tongue I know what I am expecting to find. Putting all this information together produces a unique picture of your health where any disease is revealed as a pattern of disharmony. These diagnosis points to the treatment plan and point selection required to address your problem and set you on the path to recovery.

The number of times you will need to see your acupuncturist may vary depending on the severity of the condition, how long you've had it, and your general health and constitution. It's impossible to generalize, but chronic conditions with extreme symptoms will take time to respond fully. Herbs, acupuncture and dietary therapy stimulate your body's own mechanisms, bringing about a state of balance by creating internal functional harmony. Drugs and surgical methods inhibit/suppress symptoms, often masking them. There is no doubt that western medicine may appear to work faster, but you must weigh the long term effects of such treatment. As a performer, your body is your instrument of expression.

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