

Acupuncture is a form of treatment that has been used by the Chinese for over two thousand years. In today's practice, it involves the insertion of fine sterile needles into various points in the body to influence the *Qi* (pronounced "chee") or vital energy present at that point.

acupuncture



how does acupuncture work?

In Chinese Medicine, it is believed that *Qi* and Blood travel along specific pathways called **meridians**. These pathways correlate loosely with areas of increased electrical conductance and intensity, and with viscerocutaneous reflexes (a reflex arc between skin sense receptors and internal organs).

Acupoints are points along meridians where *Qi* gathers close to the skin. These points have been found to possess unique qualities relating to skin electrical resistance and electrolyte concentrations. They also correspond roughly to motor and trigger points.

When acupoints are stimulated by needling, *Qi* is said to "arrive" at that point. *Qi* is then influenced by different needle manipulation techniques to effect changes in internal organ systems. These changes are thought to take place in part via the release of hormones and **endorphins**, in response to stimulation of nerves and tissues at the acupoint. Endorphins are natural substances released by the body which alleviate pain and produce a sensation of wellbeing and pleasure. These substances act as signals which activate the nervous, endocrine, immune and cardiovascular systems.

Needling also stimulates a local reaction around the acupoint, leading to reduction of pain and inflammation in that area.

Rothfeld GS. The scientific mechanisms of acupuncture. In: Wisneski LA, ed. *The Physician's Integrative Medicine Companion*. Newton, Mass: Integrative Medicine Communications; 2000:24-28.

can acupuncture work for me?

Everyone is different, and before you have any treatment your practitioner will make an individual assessment of your health. You will then be advised if acupuncture is suitable for your condition.

The World Health Organisation advises that acupuncture can help to treat:

- **Respiratory Diseases** such as acute sinusitis, acute rhinitis, common cold, acute tonsillitis, acute bronchitis, bronchial asthma
- **Eye Disorders** such as acute conjunctivitis, cataract (without complications), myopia, central retinitis
- **Disorders of the Mouth Cavity** such as toothache, pain after tooth extraction, gingivitis, pharyngitis

- **Orthopedic Disorders** such as peri-arthritis humeroscapularis, tennis elbow, sciatica, low back pain, rheumatoid arthritis
- **Gastrointestinal Disorders** such as spasm of the esophagus and cardia, hiccups, gastroptosis, acute and chronic gastritis, chronic duodenal ulcer, acute and chronic colitis, acute bacterial dysentery, constipation, diarrhea, paralytic ileus, nausea
- **Neurological Disorders** such as headache, migraine, trigeminal neuralgia, facial paralysis, paralysis after a stroke, peripheral neuropathy, paralysis caused by poliomyelitis, Meniere's syndrome, neurogenic bladder dysfunction, nocturnal enuresis, intercostal neuralgia.

In addition, acupuncture may help in controlling blood pressure, treating depression and anxiety, and treating gynaecological disorders such as abnormal periods, endometriosis, premenstrual syndrome.

does acupuncture hurt?

Most people find that having acupuncture does not hurt and is very different to having an injection or a blood test. This is because acupuncture needles are much finer than needles used for other purposes. They are inserted with a swift motion, hence penetrating the skin (where most nerve endings are found) very quickly. This minimises pain and discomfort.

You may feel numbness, tingling, or a distending or swollen sensation where the needles have been inserted, especially upon manipulation. This is called the de *Qi* sensation, which means that *Qi* has arrived at the acupoint. Acquiring the de *Qi* sensation is important because it means that the needling has been successful.

are there any side effects of acupuncture?

Acupuncture which is administered by a trained practitioner is generally extremely safe.

Common side effects of acupuncture include:

- a temporary increase in symptoms such as pain or dizziness
- local bruising and pain
- temporary drowsiness
- feeling faint

Uncommonly, a needle may break or bend, usually due to muscular tension. Your practitioner is trained to deal with these situations.

More serious side effects are rare and usually happen as a result of lack of adequate training in proper technique and knowledge of anatomy. These include:

- damage to internal organs
- damage to nerves
- infection
- spinal cord injury

Ref: Peuker ET, White A, Ernst E, Pera F, Filler TJ . Traumatic complications of acupuncture. *Arch Fam Med.* 1999;8:553-558.

can anyone have acupuncture?

Acupuncture may not be suitable for you if you are:

- pregnant
- very ill
- hungry
- intoxicated
- have a skin infection
- have a bleeding disorder

Your practitioner will be able to advise if acupuncture is suitable for you.

how many treatments will I need and how often will I have them?

The number of treatments will depend on what is being treated. You may only need several treatments for an acute condition such as a sprain, or, treatment may extend over months for a chronic condition. In general, it is recommended that you are treated weekly to get the maximum benefit. However, in long-standing conditions it may be suitable to be treated less frequently.

© Copyright Carolyn Ee 2005