

Acupuncture For Cynics

don't be scared
to be healed



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Introduction to Acupuncture

Most of us have heard of acupuncture, but the truth of the matter is that for many of us, that's as far as our knowledge of acupuncture goes. We know it involves sticking needles into our body to help relieve pain. But the very idea of needles probably sounds painful. However, this is not really the case.

Acupuncture is a branch of traditional Chinese medicine. This framework of medical practice begins with the belief that our body is a balance of two opposite yet inseparable forces – the yin and yang.

By the same line of thinking, this applies to the entire universe. Yin represents forces such as the cold, the slow and other passive forces, whilst Yang represents heat, excitement and other active forces. It is a combination of these forces and the balance between them that determines our mental and physical well-being.

Another cornerstone of traditional Chinese medicine is the concept of 'chi' (pronounced chee). Chi is the life force of the universe. In the body, it is the 'chi' that creates and animates life. We are all born with a certain amount of chi and continually acquire it throughout our lives through food, air, water and sunlight. Chi is believed to move through our body in channels called meridians. The quantity and quality of chi in our body depends on the state of our mental and physical balance (as represented by the yin and yang).

In fact, imbalances of the yin and yang in the body block the channels through which chi travels in our body. There are twelve main meridians (channels through which chi – our vital energy – can travel) in our body, eight minor meridians and over 2000 acupuncture points or acupoints which connect these meridians. The practice of acupuncture unblocks these chi pathways, thus ensuring the constant and free flow of energy through our body for mental and physical wellbeing.

Oriental medicine has some basic principles but they are not set in stone. Acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine at large are tailored and modified to suit each patient. Furthermore there are many different schools of thought.

Traditional Chinese medicine is a complete healthcare system that is capable of providing both specialized and primary healthcare. It also gives us guidelines on how to prevent illnesses.

The bulk of traditional Chinese medicine's roots lie in Taoism. Taoism is both a religion and a philosophy of life. The main focus of Taoism is the natural laws of the universe and our relationship to the universe.

Some of the basic principles of Taoism are listed below. They must be understood in terms of their applications to health and healing:

- Basic laws of nature govern the universe. We are a part of this universe and we must exist within that framework and abide by these laws.
- In its natural order, the universe is perfectly harmonious and perfectly organized. If humans live according to the laws of the universe, they will also be in harmony.
- Change is the only constant. Our universe is dynamic. If we do not change ourselves in line with the universe, disharmony will prevail. It is this disharmony that will cause sickness or illness of the mind and body.
- All life is interconnected and interdependent. To ensure overall well being we need to consider the whole before the parts. When curing an illness or sickness we must adopt a systems approach, that is, look at the body as a whole rather than as parts.
- We are a part of the universe. We are not independent of our universe. In fact, we have an intimate connection with our environment and universe. Therefore, our spiritual, mental and physical health is affected by our environment and external factors.

The word 'acupuncture' literally means 'pricking with a needle.' Acupuncture points are, in fact, the focus of acupuncture treatments. Therefore, acupuncture involves the insertion and manipulation of needles into acupuncture points on the body for restoring health and well being.

Acupuncture originated in China more than 2000 years ago – making it one of the oldest and most commonly practiced medical procedures in the world. Research into acupuncture is still ongoing and practices and theories are being constantly updated.

In essence, acupuncture is aimed at promoting well being and alleviating pain. The method may seem alien to many of us but it has been practiced in China and beyond for thousands of years and continues to be validated by scientists even today.

Acupuncture is now practiced the world over to benefit of people of all races, ages and ailments.

Origins and History

Conceptual Development

Acupuncture is more than just a remedy. It is both a science and an art, one that has been thousands of years in the making. Acupuncture is an ancient form of healing that pre-dates written history. It is rooted in a Taoist philosophy more than 6000 years old.

Legendary Chinese sage, Fu Hsi, observed nature – particularly the flow of energy within one's self and beyond. He also saw the connection between the human body and the universe at large. He created the first two symbols – that of a broken line, and an unbroken line. They represented the two major forces in nature – creation and reception.

This was, in fact, the basis of the principle of duality or yin-yang.

The Practice of Acupuncture

The primitive history of China is divided into two eras. These are the Old Stone Age (more than 10,000 years ago) and the New Stone Age (10,000 – 4,000 years ago) periods.

In the Old Stone Age period, knives made of stone were used for medical procedures. During the New Stone Age, stones were made into sharp needles and served as healing instruments. They were called 'bian' stones. Metal needles soon replaced stones, including those made of bronze, silver and even gold.

The development of acupuncture as we know it started between the years 3045-204BC in a medical manual called Nei-Jing - The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine.

The first part of this manual describes anatomy, physiology, various syndromes, the yin and the yang, the five elements, treatments and man's relationship with nature.

The second part of the manual is all about acupuncture, including descriptions of the meridians (the pathways of vital energy in the body), the functions of the organs, the functions of acupuncture points, types of needles, types of chi and much more.

Between AD 260 and 265, the physician Huang Fu Mi organized much of the ancient Chinese medical texts into one comprehensive manual, which he called The Systematic Classics of Acupuncture and Moxibustion. Over the years, acupuncture texts continued to be revised and updated.

In the 20th century – in 1950 to be precise – Chairman Mao moved for a combination of traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine. Acupuncture was now being offered in hospitals across China.

Acupuncture research continued apace during the 1950s and 1960s with further research into ancient texts, acupuncture anesthesia and acupuncture's effect on internal organs.

To the present day, acupuncture plays a crucial role in the medical system of China. China is at the forefront of researching all important aspects and applications of acupuncture and its effects. Acupuncture has become modernized, yet it is still deeply tied to the ancient philosophy of nature, balance and well-being.

The Basics of Chinese Medicine

The wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine observes the relationship between our mind, body and spirit.

Keeping this in mind, it is a 'holistic' approach that promotes healing on multiple levels. So it is fair to say that traditional Chinese medicine focuses on holistic healing.

Holistic health refers to a philosophy of physical care that is of the view that our body, mind and even spiritual experiences are inter-connected. It is the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In the same way, traditional Chinese medicine sees the body as a universe, one which must be governed by the laws of balance (the yin and the yang). Our emotional and mental well being is just as likely to affect our vulnerability to disease, and external factors such as work, lifestyle choices, environment and even relationships are crucial to the overall picture of one's health.

Contemporary Western medicine describes health in measurable and quantitative processes of chemical reactions. In contrast, traditional Chinese medicine uses the idea of the yin-yang, the organ system and the five elements to look at the body and health. We have already discussed the concept of the yin and the yang briefly – but it is worth understanding these basic concepts in greater depth to improve our understanding of many other aspects of traditional Chinese medicine

Yin and Yang

In Chinese philosophy, the body and the universe at large are best described by opposing and separate yet complementary principles – that is, yin and yang.

Yin represents the cold, the feminine, the light, the inward and downward direction and the passive. Yang represents the hot, the masculine, the dark, the outward and upward direction and the active.

The two forces are in constant interaction and opposition yet always influencing each other. For example, if one is suffering from symptoms of high blood pressure, Chinese traditional medicine would tell you that

the heart has too much yang, and prescribe methods of reducing the yang or increasing the yin of the heart, after consideration of the effects of this on the other symptoms and organs of the body. Therefore, acupuncture therapies seek to increase or decrease yang or increase or decrease yin in particular body regions.

Chi

Chi – as we mentioned before – is a cornerstone of traditional Chinese medical philosophy. Chi is believed to exist in all living things as a critically important life force or spiritual energy. It is generated by our internal organs and we also receive it from food, water, air and sun light. Our body has natural patterns through which chi flows – the meridians. It flows through the body to help nourish and regenerate. Illnesses are often the by-product of blocked or imbalanced chi in the body's meridians or an imbalance of chi in the body's key organs. Traditional Chinese medicine relieves these imbalances by adjusting chi circulation in the body. Acupuncture is one of the ways of achieving an ideal flow of chi through the body.

Zang Fu

The Zang Fu are the internal organs of the body. There are twelve main organs in the Chinese medical system – the lungs, kidney, large intestine, urinary bladder, small intestine, spleen, stomach, liver, gallbladder, pericardium and the 'triple warmer' also known as san jiao (the entire torso region). Each organ has a particular kind of chi energy associated with it. Each organ also interacts with particular emotions on a mental level.

With twelve major organs, there are twelve types of chi which move through the main channels or meridians. Chinese medicine aims to heal by connecting symptoms to organs. Symptoms are caused by yin and yang imbalances in the organs or due to an unhealthy flow of chi between organs.

Coming back to the concept of zang fu, this theory also returns us to the concept of yin and yang. 'Zang' is related to the yin organs – lungs, heart, spleen, kidneys, liver and the pericardium. The 'Fu' on the other hand is related to what are deemed to be the yang organs – gall bladder, both the small and large intestines, stomach, urinary bladder, and the triple warmer or san jiao.

Each zang organ is paired or coupled with a fu organ – except for the pericardium and the triple warmer. These two both describe functions which are not related to any organ.

In this arrangement, all of the organs help to regulate one another. Each fu organ has a corresponding zang organ and while one 'side' of this organ balance is responsible for negatively regulating its organ, the

other one is responsible for positively regulating. The way in which organs interact with each other is described by the five element theory.

The Five Elements

Another fundamental concept in the theory of traditional Chinese medicine is that our body and the universe at large is made up of five main elements in nature. Those elements are wood, fire, earth, metal and water. The elements are connected to each other and each one generates another element or controls another element. Each organ is related to a particular element. Traditional Chinese medicine uses this categorization of organs and elements to describe, diagnose and treat medical conditions.

For example, the kidney is related to water and the heart is related to fire and these two organs have the same relationship as water and fire. Therefore, following this theory, if the kidney is weak there maybe a problem with the heart. So, treatment could be applied by acupuncture or herbs to cool down the heart or increase the chi (energy) in the kidney system.

The five elements of wood, fire, earth, water and metal are related to the following combinations of the vital organs or zang fu:

- Wood is related to the liver and gall bladder.
- Fire is related to the heart and small intestine.
- Earth is related to the spleen and stomach.
- Water is related to the kidney and urinary bladder.
- Metal is related to the lung and large intestine.

Diagnosis in traditional Chinese medicine relies on recognizing and establishing global patters of dysfunction in a patient which can be explained in terms of the five element theory and the yin and the yang theory.

Why Acupuncture? – The Scientific Perspective

The Chinese system of medicine is quite intricate, especially in the way that it is suggested that our organs and mental symptoms are related.

Traditionally, Western scientists and medical practitioners have been suspicious about the nature of this traditional healing method.

However, some interesting parallels between Western and traditional Chinese medicine have been observed over recent years. As an example, with reference to our earlier example of the relationship between the heart and the kidney, Western medicine has now observed that when one suffers from severe heart problems, kidney failure is often quite close behind.

Whilst this is a relatively recent discovery in the West, this connection between the two organs was established many centuries ago in traditional Chinese medicine.

More than 10,000 studies have been conducted into the scientific basis of the effectiveness of acupuncture. It should, therefore, be no surprise that the science of acupuncture is evolving as scientists are taking a renewed interest in this centuries old science.

Because of this, it is now a highly respected, yet intriguing mode of healing. There are several contemporary scientific theories that argue the case of acupuncture.

There are in fact changes that happen in our bodies when acupuncture is performed. Consider the scientific theories below as evidence of this truth:

- Studies using radioactive tracers have shown that acupuncture channels or meridians are in fact distinct channels that are separate from blood vessels and lymph vessels.
- Acupuncture points on the body generally have a higher electrical resistance than surrounding tissue.
- The conduction of electricity through our bodies is faster through the meridians than it is through the rest of the body.
- An electrical charge initiated at one acupoint can be received at a distant point on the same meridian.
- The acupuncture needle can act as an antenna and attract electromagnetic energy to pass it into tissue.
- Acupuncture also makes the brain release neuropeptides that are helpful in relieving pain.

- Another theory claims that needles can jam the pathways and prevent pain signals from reaching the brain.

Neuro-hormonal Theory

The transmission of pain between the various points of our body and brain can be modulated at different levels in the brain.

Different structures in the brain will process different aspects of pain, such as the experience of emotional pain, the perception of what pain feels like, the recognition of how harmful the pain will be and where the pain is coming from.

The blocking of pain is mediated by what we call neuro-hormones that are attached to the receptors which are responsible for blocking pain. Pain relief using the drug morphine acts on the same receptors that are responsible for blocking pain as those addressed by endorphins, which is a natural substance produced by the body for blocking pain.

Studies have shown that the pain killing properties of acupuncture come about by stimulating the flow of natural endorphins in the brain.

This can be scientifically or medically proven by blocking the action of endorphins using a drug called naloxone. When naloxone is administered, the pain killing effect of the endorphin is nullified and the patient feels pain again. Furthermore, when naloxone was given to a patient being actively treated by acupuncture, the pain relieving effects of acupuncture were also reversed. This means that the site where acupuncture is applied is subject to the natural release of endorphins by the brain.

Recent studies have also show that acupuncture releases the levels of nitric oxide in the region of treatment, and that this, it turn, increases blood circulation in the region.

Hologram Theory

Our lives began in the womb as a single cell. Then (according to acupuncture theory) it is safe to say that there is a part in the whole and the whole in the part at the same time. This is what is sometimes known as the hologram theory of acupuncture.

If you were to take apart a holographic image, then a fragment of the image will represent the whole image, although it is obviously considerably less detailed. Therefore, every cell in our body is related to every other cell in the body and every one therefore affects every other one. From this perspective, applying acupuncture to a particular region can affect a seemingly unrelated region.

Fractal Theory

Fractals are patterns that remain the same at all sizes. In simpler terms, the whole structure of the object is composed of many thousands of miniature versions of the object.

It is believed that the stimulation of acupuncture points affects remote parts of the body due to fractal resonance. For example, the foot is often seen as 'mini-body' and treating the foot will therefore yield results for ailments in other parts of the body.

Chaos Theory

This theory is based on the idea that sometimes systems may seem random and often even chaotic, whereas in reality they follow a much deeper order that can only be explained by reference to complex formulae.

Chaotic systems can be tamed by recognizing the multiple patterns that cause the appearance of chaos and then adjusting or modifying one or more of those patterns or symptoms with many small inputs.

Acupuncture is exactly such a series of small inputs that influences the seemingly chaotic human body.

Physiology and Acupuncture

When describing our physiology in terms of acupuncture, we need to concern ourselves with meridians and acupuncture points or acupoints (as we will call them now). We have already established that meridians are the channels through which chi flows in our body between the main twelve organs. Acupoints are various points along these meridians through which we are able to manipulate the flow of energy.

The Channels or Meridians

Channels or meridians are the pathways for chi and the connection between the vital organs or zang fu. The Standard Acupuncture Nomenclature published by the World Health Organization lists some 20 meridians.

These 20 meridians are further divided into 'standard meridians'; one meridian each for the twelve major organs. Each meridian is responsible for nourishing that particular organ. There are also 8 'extraordinary' meridians – only two of which have their own set points, the other six connecting various points on the other meridians.

The twelve main meridians are the pathways that connect our inner world with the outer world.

Chi is always flowing through our bodies. Chi enters our body at specific points in a particular meridian and flows out of the opposite end. This energy then enters the next meridian in the sequence. It continues to flow through the entire body, one meridian after the other. This flow cycle takes 24 hours to complete.

Each of the twelve main meridians is active for two particular hours in the day. This does not mean that for the remaining twenty two hours the meridian is not functioning, but simply that the activity of chi in those meridians is reduced.

The twelve standard meridians follow the arms and legs. They provide and regulate chi for the lungs, large intestine, stomach, spleen, heart, small intestine, urinary bladder, kidney, pericardium, gall bladder, liver and the triple warmer (the torso). It is important to note that these refer to functions of the mentioned organs rather than the structural organ.

The meridians are also divided according to yin and yang. The yin meridians of the arms include the lung, heart and pericardium. The yang meridians of the arms include both the large and small intestine and the triple warmer. The yin meridians of the leg are the liver, kidney and spleen. The yang meridians of the leg include the gall bladder, the urinary bladder and the stomach.

Acupuncture Points/Acupoints

Acupuncture points are specific points found on your body which are the focus of acupuncture and other forms of acupuncture which we will look into a little later.

Hundreds of acupuncture points are found on the meridians but there are also many other extra acupuncture points that are not linked to any particular meridian as such.

As we mentioned before in the discussion of the organs, acupuncturists view the concepts of traditional Chinese medicine in functional rather than structural terms. What this means is that concepts are more crucial in patient diagnosis and treatment than describing anatomy.

Actually there is little or no anatomical evidence for the existence of these acupuncture points or even meridians. However there is considerable evidence of the effects of acupuncture on the appropriate acupuncture points. Neuro-imaging research has shown that certain acupuncture points have effects that are not otherwise predictable.

The Theory behind Acupuncture Points

Acupuncture points used for treatment may or may not be in the same body region as the symptom. The traditional Chinese medicinal theory is that the selection of these points is based on the fact that they stimulate the meridian system and bring relief to ailments by rebalancing the yin and yang in our body and regulating the flow of chi.

Body acupuncture points are located by using a unit of measure called the 'cun'.

This is calculated in accordance with the proportional distances from various landmarks on the body. Acupuncture points, therefore, are determined by these landmark points.

These anatomical landmarks are determined by palpation, by which we mean the ability to diagnose illness by touch. There are some 400 acupuncture points recognized by the World Health Organization on the meridians.

Some basic points are very rarely used. Some are used much more frequently and are more 'valuable' than others because they can treat many different conditions. Location of acupuncture points by feeling for tenderness of the skin is a common way. Acupuncture points can also be found by looking for minute changes in temperature on the skin surface and even the 'stickiness' of the skin or tissue.

Body acupuncture points are referred to by their traditional Chinese names or through the meridians on which they are found, followed by a number. This indicates the order of the point on the actual meridian.

For example, a common point on the hand is the 'hegu'. It is also known as LI4 which means that is the fourth point on the long intestine meridian.

Types of Acupuncture Points

Particular acupuncture points have different functions assigned to them within the framework of traditional Chinese medicine.

The Five Transporting Points System

This describes the transportation or flow of chi in the meridians. It is described in comparison to a river. Functional points along this line of flow are described according to their location. This analogy of a river sees chi bubbling up from a spring which then grows in depth and breadth to become a river, which finally flows to the sea.

- Jing (well) points are those points where the chi bubbles up or, in other words, originates from. These are always the first points on the yang channels or the last points on the yin channels. These points are indicated for that feeling of fullness and heaviness below the heart and disorders of the yang organs (small intestine, large intestine, gall bladder, urinary bladder, stomach and the triple warmer or san jiao)
- Ying (spring) points are where the chi glides down the channel or meridians. These points are indicated for treating body heat and changes in skin complexion.
- Shu (stream) points on the body are where the vital energy or chi pours down the meridians. These acupuncture points are indicated for the treatment of bodily heaviness, pains of the joints and intermittent diseases.
- Jing (river) points are where the chi flows in the meridians. These acupuncture points are indicated for the treatment of chills, fever, cough and diseases of the bones and sinews.
- He (sea) points are where the chi collects and then begins to seep more into the body. These acupuncture points are indicated for treating disorders such as the counter flow of chi in the body.

5 Phase/Element Points

These points ascribe each of the five elements – wood, fire, metal, earth and water – to each one of the five transporting points.

All the jing well points are associated with wood. The ying spring points are related to fire. All of the jing river points are associated with metal. The shu stream points are associated with earth. The he sea points are all related to the element of water.

The above relationships are relevant for the yin channels only. For the yang channels it is different.

The jing well points are associated with metal. The ying spring points are related to water. The jing river points are associated with the element of fire and the shu stream points are related to wood. All the he sea points are earth related.

Xi Cleft Points

The xi cleft points are the points on the channel where both blood and chi gather to plunge deeper into the body. These acupuncture points are often indicated for acute pain.

Yuan Source Points

These yuan source points are those from which a particular type of chi – yuan – can be accessed and manipulated. Yuan chi is the chi responsible for 'creation.'

Luo Connecting Points

These luo connecting points are found on the meridian where each meridian diverges. Each of the twelve main meridians have a luo connecting point where it diverges from the main channel.

Back Shu Points

Back shu points are located on the paraspinal muscles found on either side of the spine. The chi of every organ of the body is transported to and from these points. The chi of these organs can be influenced and manipulated by working these back shu points.

Front Mu Points

These points called 'front mu' are actually located very close to their corresponding organs. They are unique in the sense that they have a direct effect on the organ but not on the corresponding meridian.

Hui Meeting Points

These meeting points are said to have a 'special' effect on the particular organs and tissues

Non-Meridian Points

There are some acupuncture points that do not lie on any particular meridians. For example, auriculotherapy utilizes the external surface of the ear to treat conditions. It makes use of hundreds of points on the ear. Hand acupuncture only uses acupuncture points on the hand.

Types of Acupuncture

Acupuncture uses very fine needles that are inserted at particular points on the body. The needles used in any treatment by acupuncture are extremely thin.

Acupuncture needles are not designed to cut the skin, so they are quite solid and thin, but extremely sharp.

When inserted properly, the patient should feel no pain at all. What a patient will feel is the chi arriving at the point where the needle is inserted. In this situation you should experience a tingling or heavy sensation.

Acupuncture points are found either on or near the surface of the skin.

The needles are initially inserted to a depth of one-quarter of an inch. After that, how far the needle needs to be inserted depends on the condition for which the patient is being treated, as well as the size and age of the patient.

There are nine different kinds of needles used in the practice of acupuncture. The most commonly used needle is the filiform needle.

These filiform needles are solid and vary in length. They are made of flexible stainless steel. Acupuncture needles are inserted and left in the patient for twenty to forty minutes.

Other than the filiform needles, other types of needles are also used for the clinical practice of acupuncture.

The common ones include the plum flower needle, the subcutaneous needle, and the three-edged needle. The plum flower needle is in fact a group of seven needles arranged to look like a flower and then attached to a handle. The needles are inserted very gently and then tapped. Subcutaneous needles are very small and are superficially embedded under the patient's skin. They are usually used on the ears. The three edged needle has a triangular body and sharp tip. It is most often used for pricking the superficial blood vessels and is primarily designed to treat chronic pain and addictions.

There are many different types of acupuncture as well as various techniques. There is even animal acupuncture for cats, dogs and horses.

When we think of acupuncture, the first thing that comes to mind is needles. However, this may not always be the case. What we have described so far is the most common form of acupuncture – the traditional Chinese method.

There are also Japanese and Korean variations, as well as electro-acupuncture, sono-puncture, acupressure and moxibustion.

Different techniques may be applied to treat different symptoms. The principals of complete acupuncture include spinal adjustment, nutrition and spiritual rejuvenation (faith, belief and confidence). The main idea is that in order to be completely healthy, it is important that we have positive energy around us, as we all know that we are more likely to fall ill when under stress.

There are variations of acupuncture that do not involve the use of needles, but even these variations have the same basic premise as the standard acupuncture that we have discussed so far. The location of acupuncture points, organization of the body and the importance of the proper energy flow are exactly the same. The major difference is that instead of a needle a different technique or instrument is used to work the acupuncture points.

Sonopuncture

In this method of treatment, a device that produces sound waves is applied to the acupuncture point. In conjunction with the sound producing device, other vibrating instruments may also be used such as tuning forks.

Sonopuncture, like acupuncture, is based on traditional Chinese medicine and in some part on New Age speculation which aims to incorporate the harmony of outer space into our bodies.

Technically the more accurate term for sonopuncture is sonopressure or phonophoresis since there is no real 'puncturing' involved.

Sonopuncture is totally painless. It can be used on its own or in conjunction with other therapies. The aim is to harmonize a person with the subtle energies of the universe. Special tuning forks that are supposedly in accordance with the laws of physics and the harmonies of the solar system are also used. Other devices for sonopuncture include chimes, Tibetan bowls or even any musical instrument. It is said that, when properly used, sonopuncture can be applied in exactly the same way as acupuncture.

Sonopuncture is a stimulation of acupuncture points often done by using a thin cylindrical high frequency sound beam. High frequency sound waves of 750,000 to one million cycles per second are the most effective for sonopuncture.

The human ear can only hear sound waves between twenty and twenty thousand cycles per second. Sonopuncture is a quick method of treatment, lasting only fifteen to forty five seconds. The sound waves can penetrate to a depth of six to eight centimeters.

Electrical Acupuncture

Another type of acupuncture involves the application of a low voltage electric current to the acupuncture point. This may be done together with the insertion of a needle or by simply applying a tiny wire to the acupuncture point and allowing a low electric current to flow. The current feels like a very light tingling sensation and is hardly painful.

The most commonly used form of electrical acupuncture is to insert the acupuncture needle as usual in order to get the desired chi reaction, by hand. Then an electrode is attached to the needle to apply continued stimulation of the acupuncture point. Exceptionally good results from electrical acupuncture are often achieved for chronic pain, paralysis and spasms. The standard duration of electrical acupuncture is ten to twenty minutes but never more than thirty minutes.

Acupressure

This next form of acupuncture is probably the least 'scary.' It is similar to Japanese acupuncture (see later). Here no instrument is used, as it needs nothing more than the application of a finger pressed on the acupuncture point. This technique is used in other treatments such as shiatsu massage and reflexology.

Acupressure actually predates acupuncture. It is an ancient art that heals by using fingers pressing on acupuncture points – which stimulates the body's self-healing properties.

When these acupuncture points are pressed they are said to release tension, improve blood circulation, and aid the overall healing process.

Acupressure and acupuncture use the same points on the body but acupressure uses the firm yet gentle pressure of the hands and sometimes even the feet.

Acupressure is probably the most effective method of self treating tension related ailments. Acupressure is most effective in relieving eyestrain, headaches, sinus problems, neck and back aches and tension caused by stress. It can also 'fix' ulcer pain, lower back pain, indigestion, constipation and menstrual cramps.

Moxibustion

Moxibustion has been practiced not only in China but across Asia for thousands of years. Actually, the traditional Chinese character for acupuncture when literally translated means 'acupuncture moxibustion.' The aim of moxibustion is the same as acupuncture, that is, to promote blood circulation, stimulate the flow of energy and maintain a healthy body and mind. Moxibustion involves burning a small, spongy herb called mugwort on acupuncture points.

There are two types of moxibustion termed direct and indirect.

In direct moxibustion a small cone shaped piece of moxa (mugwort) is applied to the acupuncture point and burned.

Indirect moxibustion is the preferred method these days due to a lower risk of burning and pain. In this method, a moxa stick about the shape and size of a cigar is burned and held near the acupuncture point for a few minutes until the spot turns red.

Another kind of direct moxibustion used both needles and moxa. A needle is inserted into the skin and kept there. Then a piece of moxa is burned and wrapped around the needle. This transmits heat to the acupuncture point and surrounding areas. Once the desired affect is achieved the moxa is extinguished and the needle is pulled out.

In traditional Chinese medicine, moxibustion is used for people suffering from cold or stagnant diseases.

Burning the herb expels the cold and emits heat to the meridians. This ensures a much smoother flow of chi and blood in the body.

Moxibustion has also proved to be useful in turning breech babies into the proper head down position before childbirth. This can be achieved by getting moxibustion treatment on a bladder meridian acupuncture point.

Moxibustion has also proved to increase the movement of the fetus in pregnant women and ease menstrual cramps. The herb mugwort also possesses the quality of improving blood flow to the uterus and pelvic area, as well as stimulating menstruation.

Japanese Acupuncture

This is a kind of acupuncture in which the practitioner uses his/her sense of touch to diagnose the affliction. Touch is used to find the location of the particular acupuncture point. Once the acupuncture point is found, a guiding tube is used to insert the extremely thin needles at a shallow depth. Japanese acupuncture is often used in conjunction with moxibustion.

Korean Acupuncture

Korean acupuncture combines the theory and techniques of traditional Chinese acupuncture and Japanese acupuncture. Diagnosis is made by assessing one's basic body type. A sub type of Korean acupuncture is hand acupuncture. The hand is seen as a microcosm of the body or a mini body, in effect. Conditions are treated anywhere on the body by applying treatment to the hands.

Trigger Point Acupuncture

Trigger point acupuncture is specially targeted towards treating tight or knotted muscles which are known as trigger points. Touch is used to

locate the tightness of muscles and then an extremely thin acupuncture needle is inserted into the selected muscle which is then probed. This causes some twitching causing the tight muscle to loosen up and relax and this eventually reduces overall muscle tightness.

Laser Acupuncture

Laser acupuncture has exactly the same principles as traditional Chinese acupuncture.

With the use of a laser beam the acupuncture practitioner stimulates the acupuncture points of the body and this helps to release blockages along the meridians. Laser acupuncture can be used on people of all ages including infants.

Uses of Acupuncture

Weight Loss

Most of us know that our ideal weight is often more difficult to achieve than it really should be, and that there are numerous expensive designer diets out there designed to help us.

However, more and more people are trying acupuncture to help them in their weight loss efforts.

Acupuncture for weight loss works in the same way as acupuncture for other conditions, as inserting needles into particular spots still helps the body function properly.

We already know that acupuncture helps the body in releasing endorphins, natural 'feel good' pain relieving chemicals. Acupuncture weight loss treatments play on this through helping to control appetite by releasing endorphins.

However, the course of treatment will be different from most other acupuncture procedures and treatments. The acupuncture practitioner will most likely ask a variety of questions and perform various examinations to understand the primary causes of the excess weight. There could be either a behavioral or physiological reason, or even both. Once the primary reason has been identified, acupuncture is applied to different parts of the body to improve body function so that it promotes weight loss.

Acupuncture weight loss treatment involves a multi-targeted approach. Body weight can be reduced by increasing the hormone output from the pituitary gland. It could also include work on reducing cravings for certain 'danger' foods or even dampening our natural appetite. Some needle placements are even known to lower the levels of insulin and lipids in the blood stream.

One of the major advantages of weight loss through acupuncture treatment is that, unlike certain weight loss medications, it has no harmful side effects. However, it is important to note that acupuncture weight loss treatments need to be repeated on a regular basis to maintain and reinforce its effects.

One also needs to pay careful attention to diet and get some exercise as well, for a well rounded weight loss program. Many acupuncture practitioners also provide their patients with a diet guide – one that ensures the regular flow of energy throughout the body.

Headaches

The causes of headache can be extremely varied. One of the most common and annoying types of headaches that most people experience

is a rhythmic throbbing in the temple area. This is known as a vascular headache.

In acupuncture, the treatment for such a headache will most commonly involve stimulating the acupuncture points located in the middle of the webs between the thumbs and palms of the patient.

These points are indicated for treating the face and head and are therefore the most crucial acupuncture points for dealing with anything affecting the face and head.

Quitting Smoking

Nicotine is probably one of the most powerful addictions known to man, as it is no less addictive than cocaine or heroin. It is estimated that smokers will try to quit the habit two or three times before they are successful.

So, when measures such as nicotine gum or patches fail, many smokers often turn to alternative methods for help. Acupuncture is often the preferred alternative method to help break the habit and, in some cases, acupuncture is actually mandated by the court of law to help those with drug addictions.

It is important to note that acupuncture is not the magic cure-all 'bullet' for stopping smoking instantly. Acupuncture will be part of a program to help someone break the habit that must also include preparation, commitment and an understanding of what acupuncture can and cannot do for the patient. Nevertheless, acupuncture treats the smoking addiction in a unique and very individual way.

A typical treatment by acupuncture for smoking will include a detailed interview to determine the patient's specific smoking habits. This will be followed by a physical exam which will include taking blood pressure and pulse measurements and observation of the tongue.

These indications as well as the patient's emotional state will create a picture for the acupuncture practitioner who can then create a specific, tailored program of acupuncture treatment for the patient.

Acupuncture treatments focus on the restlessness, irritability and cravings that one experiences when trying to break the habit. They also help to detox and relax the body.

As mentioned earlier, acupuncture treatments for smoking are unique for each patient. However, in most cases, a combination of acupuncture points on the body and ear are used. These points are said to influence the organs and the chi pathways that are connected to smoking.

Various points on the ear deal with different symptoms of smoking. Acupuncture alleviates tension, diminishes appetite and craving as well as increasing will power.

An acupuncture point found on the wrist is another crucial point for helping to break the addiction.

The treatment lasts between five and thirty minutes, with the patient being treated once or twice a week. Ear press needles or silver pellets may be applied to the acupuncture points in between treatments to lessen cravings. A stop smoking program consists of four to six treatments in the first few months and then they become less frequent, falling to monthly treatments for four to six months.

Insomnia

Insomnia can have serious debilitating effects on a person, as it is so much more than simply tossing and turning in bed.

Insomnia can manifest itself in many ways. The most common symptom of insomnia is being unable to fall asleep for extended periods of time, if at all. Other symptoms include the inability to fall into deep sleep. The accumulated effects can and do include physical tiredness, difficulty in concentrating, lethargy, depression and irritability. Sleep needs in terms of hours vary for each person.

The important issue when dealing with insomnia is the quality of day time activity.

Acupuncture treatment for insomnia treats patients on an individual basis and creates a holistic treatment system. Insomnia can be caused by anxiety, stress, depression, taxing work schedules, medications, alcohol and drug abuse, chronic pain etc.

Acupuncture has proven to be good for each of these insomnia causes and symptoms. It is therefore able to treat insomnia at the grassroots for the vast majority of sufferers.

Traditional Chinese medicine sees insomnia in relation principally to the heart but other organs may also be involved.

Insomnia is often caused by stress. Stress weakens the liver system which has a direct affect on our nerves. The five element theory says that there is a relation between the liver and the nerves. This means that the liver is weakened by things that tend to get on our nerves.

When the liver is unbalanced and required to deliver chi it does not have, then the uneasy symptoms brought on by this are the body's way of signaling that something is wrong and needs to be put in order.

Acupuncture also calms our nerves. It helps to clear obstructions of the muscle and nerve channels. The most commonly noted advantages of

acupuncture include deeper breathing, better digestion, decrease in pain, improved sleeping patterns and all over well being. These benefits in themselves are excellent treatment for insomnia.

Martial Arts

Acupuncture is a science and art for healing. However, knowledge of acupuncture is useful for those who practice the martial arts as well. We know already that there are many kinds of acupuncture points and stimulating different acupuncture points yields different results.

The stimulation of some acupuncture points can be painful because of the nerves found in the area. Our body has a pain withdrawal reflex which causes us to move away from the source of pain. Martial artists make use of this knowledge, often unknowingly.

Pressure applied to the collar bone from above will cause one to move down, while poking between the jaw and neck will make one move upwards. Some points on the body will react more violently than others. When a muscle is subjected to a direct attack, it will contract. For example, an attack on the outer leg will cause one to fall over as in this situation a person's leg automatically loses power.

Applying pressure on acupuncture points may also hurt an opponent.

For example, applying pressure to the carotid artery will make the body think that its blood pressure is too high and it will therefore automatically lower blood pressure, which will bring on a black out.

There are also certain acupuncture points which when struck are more likely to break than others.

At its most basic level, an attack on the body affects the flow of chi around the body and thus affects the condition of that body. Some acupuncture techniques are potent enough to cause serious injuries and even death!

Respiratory Problems

According to the World Health Organization, acupuncture is indicated for treating six different kinds of respiratory problems. These are acute rhinitis, acute sinusitis, the common cold, acute tonsillitis, acute bronchitis and bronchial asthma.

In traditional Chinese medicine, asthma is known as xiao chuan which translates as wheezing and dyspnea. It incorporates various kinds of respiratory disorders, and such wheezing and shortness of breath symptoms are manifestations that are seen in many types of respiratory syndromes such as bronchitis and asthma.

Asthma is a chronic lung disease and occurs when the inner walls of the airways, the bronchial tubes, become inflamed. Swelling of these

bronchial tubes and the excessive mucus emanating from the inner walls cause the tubes to become narrow and this partially blocks the airways. Allergies, bronchiole infection and hyperirritability of the airway tubes are among the most common causes of asthma.

Traditional Chinese medicine has been treating asthma for many thousands of years. Acupuncture helps the prevention of respiratory problems by balancing and improving the immune system. It also reduces the risk of allergic reactions and bronchial inflammation. Acupuncture can also adjust the nervous system to expand the walls of the airways whilst at the same time increasing lung capacity as well as reducing and removing excess mucus and phlegm.

Disorders of the Eye

The World Health Organization has indicated acupuncture as a valid treatment for eye disorders including (particularly in children) conjunctivitis and cataracts. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, diseases of the eye are directly related to the liver.

The eye is nourished by all of the internal organs in the body. The lens of the eye and the pupil is 'attached' to the kidney, the sclera belongs to the lungs, the arteries and veins to the heart, the top eyelids are associated with the spleen, the bottom eyelid belongs to the stomach, and the cornea and the iris belongs to the liver. The spleen and stomach control circulation in the eyes. An imbalance in any of the internal organs can lead to sight problems or eye disease.

Particular points around the eye are indicated for treating different disorders. The inner corners of the eyes are the most commonly used points for dealing with eye disease ranging from early stage cataracts to vision loss that comes with hysteria.

The hollow of the eyebrows at the midpoint is good for dealing with eye problems caused by stress, too much studying and other kinds of mental strain. The cavities found on the outer limit of the eye are indicated for conjunctivitis, sore eyes, photophobia, dry, itchy eyes, cataracts and blurred vision, and lateral headaches.

Gastro Intestinal Disorders

The World Health Organization has recommended acupuncture treatments for dealing with a variety of gastric disorders such as hiccups, gastritis, gastric hyper acidity, ulcers, colitis, constipation and diarrhea.

In the theory of traditional Chinese medicine, the key organ to take note of when looking at such gastric disorders is the spleen. It has the primary responsibility for the transportation and transformation of food around the body, including the excretion of waste from the body.

For the spleen to function well, it must be moist. However, if there is a deficiency of chi in the spleen, it may become too moist and a condition known as 'damp heat' will develop.

For the stomach to function well, it must be dry. When it is imbalanced, it can easily overheat and create a painful condition known as 'stomach fire.' The liver can also contribute to gastric infections.

There are four main reasons for gastric disorders according to traditional Chinese medicine:

- Deficiency of chi in the spleen: this can be brought on by severe fatigue or severe illness.
- Retention of damp heat: this could be caused by infections, improper diet and environmental factors.
- Disharmony in the liver and spleen: this could be caused by emotional disturbances.
- Deficiency of yang in the spleen and kidney: this is caused by illnesses or aging.

Most patients who are suffering from gastric disorders have a lower than usual immune response.

The cells of the immune system produce a protein called immunoglobulin in the blood serum and tissue fluids. This protein helps to exterminate antigen bearing micro-organisms in the blood stream and tissues. Extensive research has proved that applying acupuncture to certain points increases the levels of this protein.

This helps the body to deal with a multitude of health conditions including chronic gastritis, antral gastritis, gastric ulcer and atrophic gastritis.

Let us look at another way in which acupuncture helps the function of the digestive system. When we eat, the stomach secretes a hormone called gastrin in the digestive tract.

This helps the stomach produce more acid and helps the contraction of muscles in the walls of the stomach and colon. This action moves the food along the digestive tract. Acupuncture techniques along the relevant acupuncture points can raise the levels of gastrin and ensure a more efficient digestive system.

Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is described as the kind of pain that persists over a long period of time. It is obvious that it limits your regular lifestyle and standard of living. So, it should be no surprise that probably the most popular use of acupuncture is pain management.

Acupuncture is claimed to be an effective treatment for many forms of chronic pain. It has also proved to be good for treating postoperative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting, nausea caused by pregnancy and dental pain. Acupuncture has also been shown to be effective for dealing with various painful conditions including migraines, back pain, tennis elbow and menstrual cramps.

Much research has been done on acupuncture but the answer as to why it works is still yet to be fully established.

However, one of the theories that explains why acupuncture works so well for treating pain is the Gate Theory of Pain. First proposed in 1965, this claims that acupuncture does its work through the nervous system where there are fibers that both transmit and inhibit pain.

These are found in the substantia gelatinosa of the spinal cord. This substantia gelatinosa is responsible for sending signals to the brain regarding pain and it is suggested that acupuncture activates the fibers that inhibit pain, thus preventing the signal from reaching the brain and thereby lowering your sensation of pain.

The two types of fibers are called A-beta and C nerve fibers. A-beta fibers have a low volt threshold, conduct faster and are large. C fibers are just the opposite – they are small, conduct slowly and have a high volt threshold.

Increased impulses from the A-beta fiber closes the gate that transmits the pain signals from the C fibers. This is where acupuncture comes in. It acts as a pain reliever by stimulating the acupoint which affects the A beta fibers. When the needle is constantly twirled, non pain impulses are transmitted through the substantia gelatinosa, closing the gate that would otherwise allow pain impulses to get through.

The impulses from the A-beta fibers are then relayed to the thalamus which is the part of the brain that is usually responsible for dealing with pain. Once the final 'gate' is closed, the whole body experiences relief from pain.

Another theory looks at acupuncture as a counter-pain treatment. It claims that when we experience pain in one part of the body, the experience of pain in another part of the body will be lessened. However this theory does not explain the long term effectiveness of pain relief from acupuncture.

How Safe is Acupuncture?

So far we have discussed the numerous ways in which acupuncture can help us improve our health and general well being.

The key to any successful therapy – whether alternative or conventional – is the accuracy of diagnosis. Once you have had the condition correctly diagnosed, the selection of treatment can then be based on the balance between the benefits and risks of the treatment, and of course the benefits should always be greater than the risks.

I cannot stress enough that acupuncture needles, when properly inserted, don't hurt! So throw out all those images of nasty needles causing great pain every time you have to visit the acupuncture specialist.

Acupuncture is an extremely safe way of encouraging the body in promoting natural healing and improving bodily functions. When done correctly, acupuncture does not cause any serious side effects. Most patients feel a short tingling sensation like a pinprick. Other patients say it is more like a dull ache.

However, as with any other medical treatment, there are risks and problems associated with acupuncture have been recorded by researchers, so let us look at what could happen due to the application of acupuncture.

- One of the most common complaints from patients is of the sensation of tightness, soreness, warmth or tingling when a needle is inserted. However, this is rarely painful and is just the sensation of 'chi' arriving at the point of insertion.
- Occasionally patients have reported needle insertions causing minor bleeding and bruising. In some cases, acupuncture also brings on fatigue or fainting.
- Blood pressure can be lowered temporarily and this can cause the patient to faint. This, however, is very rare.
- Some people are even allergic to metals. The metal of the needle can cause them to develop an allergic reaction and such patients can develop a rash.
- More seriously, using improperly sterilized needles can transmit blood related infections between users.
- When needles are not properly inserted, it can lead to tearing of the vital organs such as lungs in the rarest of cases.

- In the case of electrical acupuncture, you may run the risk of nerve damage. This can be caused by a faulty electro-stimulator or if the voltage is too high or applied for too long.
- In the case of moxibustion, burning the mugwort herb can cause up to second degree burns on the skin if it is held on the skin or near the skin for too long.
- In the case of acupressure, the wrong application and amount of pressure can cause soreness of the muscles and it may also cause bruising. Pressure applied on any superficial nerves can cause nerve inflammation, especially on the funny bone.

The key to avoiding any of these acupuncture risks is to find and use a properly qualified acupuncturist. Do so and your experience with a fully trained and experienced acupuncturist should be a fulfilling experience and not a dangerous one.

Acupuncture is very safe when practiced by a genuine professional. The risks described above and even spinal cord injury can occur if you are visiting the 'wrong' acupuncturist and a person who is not properly trained can cause permanent damage.

The most important thing to note is the dangers of sharing needles. New needles must be used for each treatment, without fail. You must insist on new needles every time you visit an acupuncturist because HIV and AIDS can be very real dangers if the needles used are not brand new.

Acupuncture is enjoying new found attention and with that has come increased attention to its risks and how to prevent them. The key to protecting yourself from the risks of any treatment is making yourself aware about all of the potential risks and learning how to avoid them.

Conclusion

We have touched upon many aspects of acupuncture.

However, this is really just the tip of the iceberg. Acupuncture is an ancient medical science and art, and it has evolved and developed over many centuries and much research has been and continues to be carried out.

There are a variety of approaches to the learning and practicing of the many variations and types of acupuncture, and nowadays acupuncture is sometimes even referred to as medical acupuncture.

This is a testament to its acceptance and increasing validity in the modern medical system. Medical acupuncture is, in fact, the term used to describe the application of acupuncture by a doctor who has been trained and licensed in Western medicine but one who has also been trained in acupuncture.

Such a doctor may use either of the approaches to heal or a combination of both. From this, it is clear that acupuncture is increasingly becoming a part of contemporary medical treatment, although it predates modern medicine.

The scope of any kind of acupuncture is three-fold. It works to promote health and well being in the individual. It aims to prevent illness and it also treats various medical conditions when they do occur.

In the 20th century, traditional Chinese medicine served more than 2 billion people in Asia, the former Soviet Union and Europe.

In the United States of America, thirty eight states have standards for the practice of acupuncture. The National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncture and Oriental Medical has been established in every one of those thirty eight states.

What this has done is to standardize the practice of acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine and furthermore this certification process holds practitioners responsible for the treatments that they give. It has also helped to guide patients seeking treatment on what practitioners they should be visiting.

Acupuncture is a part of the total holistic approach to health care, and holistic healing is of the view that the whole of an entity is greater than the sum of its parts.

It also adopts the view that good health is not just the absence of pain and disease. Good health involves having of a sound mind, body and soul as well as remaining disease and illness free.

Having gone through these pages should have given you a head start towards knowing everything you need to know about acupuncture.

Acupuncture can help where other forms of treatment have failed and the best part is there are few known side effects.

As I have stated several times, acupuncture predates Western medicine, and there is little doubt that the only thing that stops many people from seeking acupuncture treatment is probably the fear of needles and the fact that they are unfamiliar with the treatment.

So, please remember that it has been a tried and tested method of treatment for many, many centuries, and that acupuncture is rapidly gaining popularity around the world.

However, to decide whether acupuncture is for you, you must be clear about what you expect from acupuncture and you must bear in mind that whilst it is very effective, it is not magic!