



Acupuncture

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a form of traditional Chinese medicine that has been practiced for thousands of years, and involves the use of needles and/or pressure and heat for the treatment and prevention of disease. Chinese medical theory suggests that a vital life energy – Qi (pronounced 'chee' or 'gee') – circulates throughout the body in a number of channels called meridians. Qi is difficult to translate into English. It may be helpful to think of it in terms of its functions in the body – warming, transforming, defending, activating, containing. When a person is healthy, the right amount of Qi flows through the body; if there is too much, not enough, or a blockage or obstruction of Qi for any reason, ailments and disease occur.

Is acupuncture safe?

The sheer popularity and growing acceptance of acupuncture speaks to both its effectiveness and safety. Americans spend over \$500 million annually on 9 to 12 million office visits for acupuncture treatments each year. There are over 10,000 acupuncture practitioners in the US, of whom 3,000 are medical doctors. In 1997, the National Institutes of Health endorsed the use of acupuncture for a number of specific applications. The US Food and Drug Administration no longer classifies acupuncture as an "experimental" treatment, and some insurance companies have begun to cover acupuncture treatments. When performed *properly* by a *trained* and *licensed* practitioner, acupuncture is safe, effective, and free from serious adverse side effects, although there may be some minimal bleeding, bruising, and a remote risk of infection.

How does acupuncture work?

According to traditional theories, acupuncture works to promote the free flow of vital energy throughout the body. This vital energy – Qi – is best described in Western medicine as bioelectric energy. Inserting needles at various precise acupuncture points serves to unblock obstructions that prevent the free flow of energy and helps to regulate and adjust the energy flow to its proper levels, enabling the body to heal itself.

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The energy meridians that carry *Qi* are the same pathways where bioelectrons most often move throughout the body. The beginning stages of pathology, dysfunction, and disease normally begin when positive and negative charges of bioelectrical movement are not balanced.

Scientists aren't really sure how acupuncture works, and have proposed a number of theories, including:

- stimulation of the body's natural painkillers
- increasing the electrical current throughout the body
- changing the level of blood circulation to enhance immunity

The modern scientific explanation is that the needles stimulate the nervous system and change the flow of bioelectrical energy, causing the release of certain natural chemicals, such as endorphins, in the spinal cord and brain. These chemicals affect the perception of pain, as well as the function of the immune system, increasing the body's resistance to disease.

What conditions can acupuncture treat?

The World Health Organization has listed over 100 disorders and conditions that may respond favorably to acupuncture, including arthritis, hypertension, constipation, diarrhea, gastritis, bladder dysfunction, bronchitis, recurrent chest infections, asthma, frozen shoulder, tennis elbow, low back pain, strained neck, and neck pain.

Some findings also suggest that acupuncture is effective in treating addictive disorders, such as drug abuse and cigarette smoking. It is also thought that acupuncture may work better than conventional medicine in some areas, such as chronic disease, pain control and stress reduction.

Acupuncture is often used for pain control following medical and dental procedures, as well as for reducing the side effects of chemotherapy. Treatments stimulate the production of the body's own morphine-like chemicals, which alleviate pain, as well as normalize and balance nerve impulses throughout the body, also serving to reduce pain. Acupuncture is perhaps best known for its effectiveness in treating pain, and received a good deal of publicity following President Nixon's trip to China in 1972, when a well known journalist for the New York Times underwent an emergency appendectomy using acupuncture as his only anesthesia.

Acupuncture is often used along with conventional medicine to improve health and promote healing. It has been shown to increase the body's levels of white blood cells and the levels of Alpha, Beta and Gamma globulins, all of which serve to fight infection or produce immune antibodies.

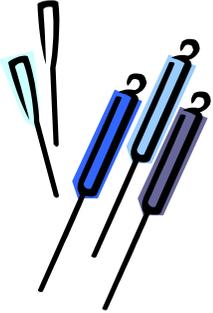
What is a typical treatment like? Does it hurt?

With traditional acupuncture, diagnosis is very important, and the practitioner may spend a good deal of time examining, asking questions and taking pulse rates at various points throughout the body. Because it

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involves an examination and some history, usually the first visit is the longest, often lasting about an hour. Subsequent visits normally take 20-30 minutes.

Acupuncture is a relatively painless procedure, though there may be some slight discomfort while the needles are being inserted. The needles are much smaller than the ones used for shots or drawing blood, and are solid rather than hollow. The sensations that follow the insertion of needles are often either a mild tingling or a slight aching or numbness. Many people are unaware of the needles actually being inserted, and most sensations quickly disappear following the removal of the needles. At its worst, acupuncture is less painful than plucking out a hair.



Most acupuncturists use between six and eight needles during each treatment session. The needles are then left in place for 20-30 minutes, during which time they may be set in motion (manually rotated in place by the practitioner) or given very low voltage electrical stimulation. Additional techniques may also be used, such as moxibustion, which is the burning of the herb moxa on or near the end of the needles, or cupping, which is the use of glass or bamboo cups on the skin to form a vacuum at specific acupuncture points.

Acupuncture normally works in stages, and few people experience total relief from symptoms after one treatment. Three treatments should be adequate to determine if you're going to respond to acupuncture. Between four and eight sessions, usually on a weekly basis, may be necessary in order to obtain maximum results.

Acupuncture is rapidly being accepted as a form of medical treatment reimbursable by insurance companies. Treatments normally cost between \$30 and \$100, with physician practitioners typically charging on the high end of the range.

What do I look for and how do I find a good acupuncturist?

The licensing of acupuncturists varies greatly from state to state, and some states only allow MDs or practitioners under the supervision of medical doctors to practice acupuncture. If you wish to be treated by an MD acupuncturist, look for a practitioner who has received training from a school accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine or belongs to the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture (AAMA).

The National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) credentials non-physician acupuncturists and requires three years of full-time training, followed by a three year apprenticeship and a rigorous exam. Check your state medical board for licensing and training requirements in your area.

Always ask a practitioner about her or his training. Also ask about the number of practical hours he or she currently has. Be sure she can explain procedures and treatments in language you can understand. Look for a practitioner who knows his limits and has a referral system in place to take care of any problems or conditions he can't treat. Ask about previous experience with conditions or problems similar to your own and find out what the signs or indications of improvement are before treatment begins.

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The answer to a simple question like "How will I know the treatments are working?" can give you a lot of information about a practitioner. Any good acupuncturist should be able to explain any procedure she performs and why it's called for.

Locate a qualified acupuncturist in your area by contacting one of the national organizations (AAMA: <http://www.medicalacupuncture.org>; NCCAOM: <http://www.nccaom.org/>)

Can acupuncture be used on people with SCI and/or TBI?

There is no evidence to indicate acupuncture cannot be used for individuals with spinal cord or brain injury. Because acupuncture is often very effective in treating pain, it may prove quite beneficial to those who have chronic pain.

How can I find out more?

There have been numerous magazine articles written in the popular press regarding acupuncture. In addition, several good books can give you a basic understanding of the principles of acupuncture. You may want to start with *The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine*, by Ted Kaptchuk (Contemporary Books, 2000).

This brochure was prepared by the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Committee of Craig Hospital. This brochure is for your information and is intended to give you some guidance in the use of acupuncture. You should always talk to your doctors before using any complementary therapies as there may be specific reasons why such therapies may not be beneficial to you.