

Getting to the Point:

Why Acupuncture is More than Just Needles

by Attilio D'Alberto

Acupuncture has been used in the Far East to restore, promote and maintain good health for over 2,500 years. The first needles were made from stone, and then later from bronze, gold and silver. The first medical text of acupuncture was 'The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine', which dates from around 300 BC. Acupuncture is an integral part of the rapid growth of complementary therapy in the UK. According to the World Health Organisation, acupuncture has been proven to be effective in relieving postoperative pain, nausea during pregnancy, nausea and vomiting resulting from chemotherapy, and dental pain with extremely low side effects. It can also alleviate anxiety, panic disorders and insomnia.

How it works

According to traditional Chinese philosophy, our health is dependent on the body's motivating energy - known as qi - moving in a smooth and balanced way through a series of meridians (channels) beneath the skin. The flow of qi can be disturbed by many factors, physical, mental and emotional: anxiety, stress, anger, fear or grief, poor nutrition, weather conditions, hereditary factors, infections, poisons and trauma. By inserting fine needles in points along the channels, an acupuncturist can stimulate the body's own healing response and help to restore its natural balance.



Tongue and pulse

To discover how the energies are flowing in your body, the acupuncturist will feel your pulses on both wrists, noting their quality, rhythm and strength. The structure, colour and coating of your tongue also provide a guide to your physical health. The aim is to discover which energy channels need adjusting for your specific complaint to improve and which require treatment to boost your overall energy and vitality.

How long does it take

This varies between patients. Most people have a course of treatment and usually notice changes after four to six sessions. Your acupuncturist will review your progress with you, and carefully monitor your treatment to ensure that it matches your needs.

What to expect

Your first consultation takes longer than subsequent sessions. This is because the acupuncturist needs to assess your general state of health in order to identify the underlying patterns of disharmony and give you the most effective treatment. You will be asked about your current symptoms and what treatment you have received so far, your medical history and that of your close family, your diet, digestive system, sleeping patterns and emotional state. Once enough information has been gathered to determine the likely causes of your problems, the acupuncturist can select the most appropriate treatment.

What does it feel like?

Acupuncture needles bear little resemblance to the needles used in injections and blood tests. They are much finer and solid, not hollow. When a needle is inserted, the sensation is often described as a tingling or dull ache. Needles are inserted and left in place for thirty minutes or more, depending on the effect required. During treatment, patients commonly experience heaviness in the limbs or a pleasant feeling of relaxation. The benefits of acupuncture frequently include more than just relief from a particular condition. Many people find that it can also lead to increased energy levels, as well as better appetite and sleep, and an enhanced sense of overall wellbeing.

Acupuncture for pain relief

One of the most well known conditions acupuncture can treat is pain. In Chinese medicine theory, pain occurs when qi or blood stops moving. It is similar to when your pipes burst in winter. The pipes are like your blood vessels or meridians and when the qi or blood stops moving, the bursting action is pain occurring in your body. Generally, acupuncture works by inserting fine needles on specific points along a blocked meridian. These points are known as acupoints. By stimulating the

qi in these specific acupoints, it is possible to unblock stagnate qi held in the meridian. This allows qi to move freely, uninhibited and relieves pain. From a scientific perspective, acupuncture has been said to work upon the nervous system to relieve pain.

With all syndromes in Chinese medicine, pain is broken down in several sub-categories or patterns:

- Blood stasis
- Cold
- Dampness
- Internal heat
- Liver and kidney deficiency
- Phlegm
- Qi and blood deficiency
- Wind

By further categorising a disorder, acupuncture is able to target the exact problem in each person and tailor make a treatment strategy just for them. In each case, acupoints will be selected to remove blockages along the meridian as well as balance the internal disharmony by regulating Yin and Yang, qi and blood. For example, in cold pain syndromes, specific acupoints will be selected to remove blockages, tonify the Yang, qi and blood to warm the body and remove coldness.

Diet

Diet can play an important factor in causing pain. For example, eating too much dairy or foods that are spicy or drinking alcohol can cause damp heat, which affects the joints leading to arthritis and chronic pain. Or eating a lot of very cold foods very often such as ice cream, chilled salads or drinks can cause internal cold and can drastically slow down the movement of qi and blood causing stagnation, similar to the burst pipes in winter analogy used above.

Environment and clothing

Our surrounding environment is often forgotten and given no significance in pain management. Chinese medicine places great importance on environmental

factors. The UK naturally has a very damp climate. Exposure to prolonged dampness can infiltrate the joints causing conditions such as chronic pain or arthritis. Suffers of damp type arthritis usually feel better in hotter, drier countries or in the summer.

We often don't associate clothing with good health, but it can play an important role in preventing pain. If you remember the saying "keep out of drafts", it applies to cold wind. If the body is attacked by cold wind it can obstruct the free flow of qi and blood causing problems such as arthritis and chronic pain. It is always good to cover the body from wind especially when it is at its strongest in spring and autumn.

Emotions

Emotions play a great role in dis-ease formation and pain management. Feeling depressed, irritable, sad or moody stagnates the qi causing blockages and pain. After a prolonged period, an individual's character will be affected by the constant pain experienced and will be moulded into a lesser representation of them. In such cases, a person's character is not their true selves but a manifestation of their internal suffering. Acupuncture works not only on the pain itself, but also the internal emotional disharmony that's being experienced and helps to restore the person as a whole, both mind, body and spirit.

As you can see, acupuncture is more than just needles and is one part of a whole system of traditional healthcare dating back thousands of years that encompasses a wealth of knowledge •



To find an acupuncturist in your local area, please refer to the British Acupuncture Council's website www.acupuncture.org.uk or ring them on 020 8735 0400.



About Attilio D'Alberto

Attilio D'Alberto graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine (Beijing University of TCM) and a BSc (Hons) TCM (Middlesex University) and is a member of the British Acupuncture Council and the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine. He practices at clinics in Wokingham, Crowthorne and Reading. His personal website is www.attiliodalberto.com. He can be contacted at enquiries@attiliodalberto.com or 07786 198900.