

# What is Acupuncture

By Anne Kinchen, R.Ac., and Bob Wachsberger

Until recently, acupuncture was most closely associated with pain management, particularly for back pain. But lately, acupuncture is being seen as useful for other conditions, such as high blood pressure, infertility, post-surgical nausea and cancer support.

How is it that sticking hair-thin needles into the body should have any effect on these conditions? It shouldn't, according to Western medicine. But with acupuncture, one must learn some new ways to view how the body-mind works.

Thousands of years ago, Chinese doctors observed the body and came up with a paradigm radically different from modern Western medicine. Where western medicine looks specifically for diseased or malfunctioning parts to treat, Chinese medicine looks at the entire body-mind as an interconnected, interrelated system of flowing energy. Treating one symptom in isolation of a person's total being is at odds with the spirit of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

TCM is based on the premise that the body is imbued with vital life energy, called "qi" which traverses the body via channels known as meridians. Qi flows through the body much the same way water flows across the earth. Disruption of that flow results in symptoms associated with poor health.

In Chinese medical philosophy, the human body is considered a microcosm of the macrocosm (Earth.) Thus we are subject to the same climatic factors such as heat, cold, dampness, dryness and wind. Most health conditions are categorized in some combination of these terms.

Acupuncture is not the only tool in the arsenal of Chinese medicine. Other associated branches of Chinese medicine are the therapeutic use of herbs, Tui na" (Chinese-style massage and chiropractic) and exercise and meditation such as Qi Gong and Tai Qi. Any or all of these might be utilized singly or in combination to encourage the restoration of the body to a state of balance or what Western medicine calls "homeostasis."

Like going to a regular, primary care doctor, patients fill out an intake form before their first appointment with an acupuncturist. Aside from the expected health-related questions, you

[one](#) will also find lifestyle questions to provide the acupuncturist with information [on their condition or symptoms](#) to help determine the appropriate course of treatment.

Patients are asked about all aspects of their life, both physical and emotional. Acupuncturists are trained to keenly observe the patient's general appearance, complexion, body type and tone of voice. Other diagnostics unique to Chinese medicine include assessing the appearance of the tongue and "reading the pulse."

Information derived from Western medical labs is also factored [into a treatment](#). Many patients whose lab results and symptomatic complaints do not conform to conventional diagnosis are treatable within the framework of Oriental medicine.

An acupuncture treatment involves the insertion and manipulation of hair-thin, sterile, disposable needles. The needles are inserted at specific sites on the body called "points," many of which lay along the meridians. Needles are inserted and manipulated at these point locations where they will alter circulation of blood and qi as well as influence a cascade of chemical and hormonal reactions.

In addition to needles, heat and electrical stimulation may be applied to the points. The heat is provided by moxibustion, the therapeutic use of *artemesai vulgaris*, a member of the sage family. It is burned over the points with or without the acupuncture needle. This technique has been popularized in Steven Seagall martial arts movies. Electrical stimulation is provided by a battery-operated device which provides a safe but therapeutic current to stimulate the acupuncture points.

After needles are inserted, patients are typically left to relax. Relaxation is a key element in subduing the "fight or flight" nervous system response and freeing up the body's energy for use in healing. The length of treatment will depend on a variety of factors including the patient's constitution, age, energy level, and the type and severity of problem to be treated.

Just as the length of treatment time is determined by several factors, so is the number of treatments necessary to effect improvement. In studies from China, treatments are generally administered daily, or at minimum three times per week. Less frequent treatments will usually result in maintenance only. Like many other forms of therapy, regular and constant therapy yields the greatest results. Other factors which may inhibit progress of acupuncture therapy include dietary indiscretions as well as chronic emotional or physical stress. Acupuncture is best delivered as a course of treatment with eight to twelve treatments constituting a course.

When performed by a trained practitioner, acupuncture treatments are, for the most part, pain-free, side-effect-free and have an excellent safety record. For many, the thought of having needles stuck in one's body is unnerving, yet many patients find acupuncture so relaxing they fall asleep on the table during treatments.

Generally some improvement in one's condition becomes noticeable within three or four treatments. In the beginning, treatments are usually spaced close together, two to three times per week. As cases begin to improve, treatment frequency can be tapered off. Patients are encouraged to explore other areas of Oriental medical philosophy on diet, exercise, stress reduction and meditation. These should all be considered on the path to wellness and longevity.

The World Health Organization recognizes acupuncture and [Traditional Chinese Medicine](#)'s effectiveness in treating over 40 common disorders including: gastrointestinal disorders, gynecological problems, reproductive issues, urogenital, respiratory, and orthopedic disorders, cancer chemotherapy support and migraine.

Progressive hospitals have integrated acupuncture into their pain management departments as well as their oncology and women's health departments. Physicians who perform acupuncture are called "medical acupuncturists" which means they have completed approximately 300 hours of continued medical education in acupuncture. By contrast, non-MD acupuncturists have had a minimum of 2,000 hours of training and a passing score on the [NCCAOM](#) national board exam which is used as a credential for licensing by the Ohio Medical Board.

[\[History proves/Statistics show that\] Chinese medicine and acupuncture promotes natural healing and improved functioning of the body. Anyone can benefit from acupuncture. – It is a simple procedure that, when coupled with other Chinese medicine therapies, such as herbal medicine, exercise and meditation, can offer impressive results and relief. It can be useful as an adjunctive, curative, or preventative therapy. It can also serve well as an alternative for patients who cannot tolerate the side effects associated with conventional drug therapy, or for those who have failed to respond to Western medicine protocols.](#)

[\(If you are interested in trying acupuncture make sure to research or interview your local acupuncturist regarding their training, experience and credentials ... etc.\)](#)

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