

Acupuncture



What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is an ancient system of healing that was developed as part of the traditional medicine of China, Japan and other Eastern countries. Its spread to the West has been relatively slow but steady, and in recent years acupuncture has found increasing acceptance in Western medical practice, particularly in pain relief.

The theory behind acupuncture is that stimulation of specific areas on the skin affects the functioning of certain organs of the body. The current practices have evolved into a system of medicine that aims to restore and maintain health by the insertion of fine needles into points (called acupuncture points or acupoints) just below the surface of the skin. These points are in very specific locations and lie on special channels of energy that are called meridians.

Acupuncture points can be stimulated in various ways, including:

- insertion of needles — the needles can also be stimulated with a small electric current (electro-acupuncture);
- warming with a smouldering herb (moxibustion);
- manual pressure alone (acupressure);
- suction using glass or plastic cups that apply a vacuum to the skin (cupping); and
- laser (commonly used in children).

How does acupuncture work?

Acupuncture is just one part of the broader system of treatment known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) which is based on the concept of an energy flow through the body called Qi or Chi. This energy is circulated through the body via several main energy pathways called meridians. Each one of these pathways or channels is thought to be linked to an internal organ. It is believed that if this flow of energy is blocked, imbalances occur which in turn lead to health problems.

This block in the energy flow can be cleared away with the insertion of acupuncture needles at special acupuncture points along the meridians. When the needles are applied to the points the organ function is stimulated. There are hundreds of acupuncture points within the meridian system.

Acupuncture and acupressure (the stimulation of the points with the fingers and hands) treatments are aimed at unblocking the meridians, easing muscle tension, and stimulating the energy and blood flow so the natural healing mechanisms of the body are adjusted, striking a balance in the body.

Acupuncture treatment

When the patient is seen for the first time, the practitioner will take a complete history and then may take a strictly Chinese approach to medical examination or they may use a combination of Eastern and Western techniques. Palpation or testing of the meridians is often done prior to needle insertion.

When the acupuncture needle is inserted, a slight, dull pain, tingling or electrical-like sensation may be felt which is called the 'De Qi' sensation and this indicates the Qi has been accessed. Once the needle is in place, no further discomfort should be felt. In actual fact, often there will be an occasional agreeable tingling or warm feeling experienced along the meridians.

The needles are usually left in place for between 10 and 30 minutes, depending on the conditions being treated. The removal of the needles usually causes no discomfort and only rarely is there any very minor bleeding from an insertion point.

The inserted needle may also be stimulated by manually rotating the needle or heating with a moxastick to enhance the effect. The needles can also be stimulated electrically using various frequencies and intensities. Some patients may require only one or 2 treatments, but others may require many sessions to achieve a successful outcome.

What is acupuncture used for?

Traditionally, acupuncture practitioners have treated a large number of different illnesses; however, in Australia, the primary use is often to alleviate pain, but its therapeutic applications have been gradually expanding. Today, acupuncture can be used in treating addictions, controlling weight and enhancing recuperation following surgery or the effects of a stroke.

Some common conditions that may successfully be treated or relieved by acupuncture include:

- headache and migraine;
- anxiety, depression, nervous tension, stress;
- addictions such as smoking and alcoholism;
- insomnia;
- digestive problems such as indigestion, flatulence, diarrhoea, constipation;
- bowel problems such as colitis and haemorrhoids;
- liver and gallbladder problems;
- nausea and vomiting that's caused by chemotherapy;
- kidney and bladder problems;
- respiratory problems such as asthmatic conditions, bronchitis, tonsillitis, sinusitis, sore throat, earache, cold and influenza;
- skin conditions such as acne, eczema or psoriasis;
- muscle problems including athletic injuries, cramps, strains and sprains;
- arthritic conditions including the general pain of arthritis, sciatica, bursitis, tendonitis, gout; and
- toothache, gum problems and mouth ulcers.

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