



Getting the Most Out of
Acupuncture

A Handbook for New Patients



How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

By Julie Odler, L.ac.

This publication is designed to provide competent, reliable, and useful information regarding the subject matter covered. It is distributed with the understanding that the author and publisher are not engaged in rendering legal, financial, or other professional advice. The author specifically disclaims any liability that is incurred from the use or application of the contents of this book. The author does not warrant the performance, effectiveness, or applicability of any sites listed in this book. All links are for information purposes only.

Contents

Introduction	4
Part One: How To Get The Most Out Of Your Acupuncture Treatments	6
My Story.....	7
The Map: How The Process Works	10
Some Important Questions To Ask Yourself Before We Begin	12
Mindset.....	15
Applying The Mindset: My Own Struggle	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Challenges.....	18
Common Questions	21
Patient Experiences	27
Part Two: How Acupuncture Works: A Better Explanation	28
Common Myths About Acupuncture	29
Common Terms Used In Acupuncture.....	37
Holistic And Wellness: What Do These Words Really Mean?.....	37
Qi.....	40
Yin And Yang	47
Tongue And Pulse Diagnosis	53
More About How Acupuncture Works: A Biomedical Perspective	55
Homeostasis.....	55
Immunity And The Inflammatory Response	56
Microcirculation And Blood Perfusion	56
Metabolic Functions	56
Autonomic Nervous System.....	56
Parasympathetic And Sympathetic Nervous Systems	57
Internal Balance	57
How Acupuncture Relieves Pain:	59
1. Gate theory.....	59
2. Stimulation of alpha brain waves (EEG).....	60
3. Relaxation of smooth muscles	60
4. Trigger Point Theory	60

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

5. Motor Point Theory 60

6. Neuroplasticity of the nervous system. 61

7. Sensory nerve fiber/chronic pain theory 61

8. Hormones and Neurotransmitters 61

Tools That Acupuncturists Use To Relieve Pain 62

 Electroacupuncture 62

 Ion pumping cords 62

 Auricular (ear) acupuncture..... 63

 Trigger Point Release 63

 Manual therapy 64

 Herbal Medicine and liniments..... 64

 Cupping..... 65

 Moxibustion 66

 Kinesiotaping (Kinesiotape, Rock Tape, KT tape, etc) 66

Conclusion 67

A Word About The Esoteric 67

References 68

Introduction

Thank you for visiting our website and downloading this free book I wrote it to help educate new patients about acupuncture and Chinese medicine (CM) in general, as I see a great need to clear up some misconceptions and continue an educational dialog between CM practitioners and the public. Many of my patients are already quite savvy, but even I found some new and interesting information in my research!

This book is also intended to be somewhat of guide, roadmap, or “handbook” for new (and returning) patients that work specifically with me. Recently I have chosen to work more deeply with patients that are truly committed, and so far I am glad I did. This decision has turned out to be more rewarding for everyone involved.

As the author of this book, I am going to address you as I would if I were talking to a friend, face to face, in person.

First, Congratulations!

This book will help both of us establish if we would make a good team. (a good “fit”) It will tell you a bit about my philosophy and how my process works, as well as a little bit about acupuncture in general. I will try to answer some basic questions that will help you to ask deeper questions, so that when we meet face-to-face, we can effectively use our time together to focus on YOU!

You are learning some very important information here. Thank you for taking time to eliminate all distractions and pay attention to the content I have included, at least in PART ONE. Relax, enjoy, and have a cup of tea!

How to Use This Book

I love writing and researching and I feel like I am never fully satisfied. This book is designed to satisfy the curiosity of those who want to dive deeper into the workings of Chinese Medicine, and who may be a bit skeptical. (which is totally understandable!) It is also beneficial for someone is looking for assurance that they have come to the right place. It is here where some of your questions may be answered that will help you determine how I can help you, as well as if you are a good candidate for acupuncture and Chinese medicine and also specifically, our clinic.

If you are short on time, or not interested in how acupuncture works, I only ask that you read Part One: How to Get the Most Out of Your Acupuncture Treatments, beginning with The Map: How the Process Works. (You can read about my story if it interests you, I have been told that people like to hear stories, so I included that as well!)

I also ask that you take some time to contemplate Important Questions to Ask Yourself Before We Begin, which is important in order to determine your level of commitment. Please also look over the chapter entitled Mindset.

Common Questions is the place to go to for questions you might have as a brand new patient. If you have any other questions, I invite you to ask me during our consultation. Once we start working together, we will have even more of an opportunity to dive deeper!

Part Two: How Acupuncture Works, may be of interest to you now or later on in the future.

Part One: How To Get The Most Out Of Your Acupuncture Treatments



A Warm Welcome!

If you are taking time to read this, I know that you are serious about your health. My hope is that you find some value in this book.

By taking this step you most likely have a deep understanding of how your current condition is affecting your life. For example, if you cannot get a full night's rest, or your back is always giving you trouble, or your shoulder is starting to hurt at night, where will you be a month from now, or 6 months to a year from now if you do not take any action? Most likely, not in a good place. These problems never "just go away" if we ignore them.

With lack of awareness, it is likely that one day, a negative "event" will occur. Your back may "go out," or maybe you will be diagnosed with a disease. Or maybe one day you just take a good honest look in the mirror and see the visible consequences of not taking good care of yourself.

How the HECK did THAT happen so fast?? These problems seem "sneaky" to us, but events never happen "out of the blue." What we choose to do or not do has a direct impact on these "events."

Likewise, what if you chose to address the problem at the root level? What if you decided to establish a maintenance plan, stay in a state of awareness, making minor adjustments in order to prevent a major crisis... what would that look like? Do that right now. Imagine both scenarios. Seriously, fast-forward yourself to 1-5 years from now and just imagine both scenarios.

My Story



To help you imagine, I will tell you about my experience:

I had a serious insomnia problem a number of years ago. I could not sleep. Really. This lasted for about two weeks. It was frustrating. I was taking over-the-counter sleep aids that made me feel awful the next day. I could not concentrate or focus on anything. But what really hit me hard was looking at a photograph of myself. To me, it looked as if I had aged about 10 years. If I looked like this on the outside, what was happening to me on the inside? Not to mention that this accelerated aging was not acceptable to me from a vanity standpoint. It is one thing to earn wrinkles and a weathered appearance from spending time outdoors, doing what you love, but yet another to look “beaten” because of stress, lack of sleep, or poor diet, and certain medications.

I am also aware that if I do not stay on top of my old injuries, my whole body is negatively affected and I feel weak and stiff... far from the athlete I used to be. First I begin to feel aches and pains. **If I ignore them, this creates a vicious cycle that is hard to break out of. I feel depressed and more vulnerable to degenerative and inflammatory diseases. I do not want to head down that path.**

Often, we are more motivated by maintaining our appearance and ability to engage in life than in preventing disease. And there is nothing wrong with that! **But just as often it is only after we lose something that we appreciate the good things we had.**

Chinese medicine (CM) is an excellent way to address problems when they are manageable, rather than waiting for a catastrophic “event” to react to. Usually the latter choice is more expensive, mentally and emotionally draining, and far less effective in the long run.

So I chose to be proactive. **Acupuncture and Chinese herbs allowed me to get the peaceful sleep I needed so that my body could begin to heal itself. And I looked much better, too!** My ankle has better range of motion and when I get regular treatments, I do not experience the flare-ups of pain that I often have in cold weather. My shoulder feels better and more stable.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

I am lucky that I have never had a major illness but I have used CM to successfully treat the following:

Severe facial pain, many types of fatigue, depression, mild anxiety, indigestion, a few headaches, PMS, elbow tendonitis, an AC shoulder separation, a bruised toe from trail running, pain from a chronic ankle injury, pain from a fantastically tight psoas muscle, a severe dry cough following a lung infection, ONE hangover, and chronic, recurring inner ear inflammation. I am also being proactive about perimenopause and menopause.

These may seem like minor things, but they can hold us back, and can become chronic or serious if we do not address them early. I know when to go to an M.D. (the lung infection comes to mind) but I also know what CM can do. It is indeed powerful medicine.

I also look for a little bit more, such as a performance edge when I ride my bike or snowboard or hike in the mountains. I still want to apply the things I learned from my days as an athlete and coach. I want to age gracefully.



It is so much more fulfilling to focus on creating a great life than on maintaining a status quo. To build something new that only you, as an individual, can create, instead of wasting your energy on just fighting “entropy.” (Decay, decline) **So think about this. Where would you direct your precious energy if you did not have to worry so much about things like nagging pain, lack of sleep, anxiety, low energy, muscle imbalances, poor digestion, or other health conditions that you are putting up with right now?**

You are not alone. These annoying health issues can lead to more serious conditions, but they can also suck the life out of us. Perhaps in addition to disease prevention, we can focus on enhancing physical and mental performance, or on allowing ourselves to claim inner peace and real, genuine satisfaction and happiness.

I enjoy working with patients who are tired of putting up with mediocrity and have made a conscious choice to be proactive instead of reacting to problems that arise. If course, problems can and do arise, but many are also preventable. If they are not preventable, or we

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

have not done our best, we can still be kind to ourselves and that too, is part of the healing process. **I am right there with you!**

I am so excited about working with you! It goes way beyond commitment for me. By choosing to work only with the best, most committed people, (like you!) everyone benefits.

The Map: How The Process Works



The next 10 pages will give you an idea of what your experience with me would be like and give you some background education so that when we meet, we do not have to start from square one.

This I did not re-invent acupuncture, but I do have a system that works. It is important that you know the process in order to begin to develop even MORE specific questions to ask, so that I can better help you.

I also want to make sure we are on the same page as far as goals, expectations, and level of commitment on your part. I can usually tell how committed a new patient is by their willingness to go through these steps.

Engage!

I like when patients are engaged. **The best relationships occur when healthcare providers and patients both work as a team.** Here are some ways this can be accomplished:

1. READ A BLOG! I have written blogs about how acupuncture works, methods I use, specific conditions acupuncture can treat, and useful tips that you can use, now, at home.

And please.. **interact!** I love writing, not to hear myself talk, but to engage with others. I feel honored and privileged to serve you, and I continue to learn from people like YOU!

2. Browse through the questions and answers.

3. Make your first appointment or consultation. From there we can decide what your goals are and how we can proceed. After your first treatment, you will be given a detailed treatment plan and a welcome package.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

4. Stick to your treatment plan, and follow the advice given. Depending on what your goals are, you may be given “homework.” You will be asked to be a full participant in your healing process and make it to your scheduled appointments, otherwise the results you desire will not likely be realized. If your goal is simple stress relief and balancing, your “homework” may consist of nothing more than enjoying your acupuncture treatment and leaving the outside world behind for an hour.

5. Enjoy the process. This is all about you!

Feel free to share this book, blogs, newsletters, and postcards with friends and family.

I love referrals, and enjoy giving back to those that make my practice possible!

Some Important Questions To Ask Yourself Before We Begin

Get another cup of tea, (or whatever suits you) have a seat, get comfortable, and answer as honestly as you can, the following questions: (I have had to ask MYSELF some of these same questions at times)

Commitment

Have you tried “almost everything” once or twice, but “nothing seems to work?”

Do you take care of yourself, or do all other duties (so-called higher priorities) seem to prevent you from doing so?

Do you typically stick with something, such as a training program, class, or series of healing treatments, or do you often get sidetracked by other things, such as vacations, projects, or the “busy-ness” of daily life?

What is your overall commitment, on a scale of 1-10? How much do you REALLY WANT the things you have decided to act on?

Awareness and Responsibility

Would you say that you have a good overall awareness of the state of your health? Are you able to tell when something is “off balance,” even slightly?

Do you notice subtle positive shifts as well as when something does not feel quite right?

Do you tend to seek out and trust the help of a professional, or do you try to do everything on your own? Is that working for you?

Have you ever ignored a problem, hoping it would go away on its own?

Do you often distract yourself from a problem by diving deeper into your work, escapism, eating too much, the “busy-ness” of random and unfocused tasks, or the needs and problems of others?

Do you see yourself as the master of your own destiny, or do bad things “just happen” to you?

Would you describe yourself as being more proactive or reactive about your health, and life in general?

Expectations and Goals

How can I help you for the duration of our time together? What is your goal?

What are you looking for in a practitioner?

Is the practitioner part of your overall plan for health, or simply a backup plan for you when you are experiencing a crisis?

Can you imagine yourself reaching the goals that I can help you attain, or is it easier to imagine yourself as having the same difficulties and obstacles a few months from now, a year from now, or 5 years from now?

Mindset

You are likely to receive great benefits from our clinic if you are:

- **Struggling with chronic health issues that have not responded to other forms of care.** Keep in mind that it is equally important to give any treatment modality a chance to actually work and not jump from one thing to the next in a random fashion or expect a quick fix. Many benefit from a combination of western medical care and “alternative” care.
- **Are over 35 or 40 and are not ready to give up on having an active and fulfilling life.** In fact, you are probably even MORE active now than at any other time in your life! You need support to meet your goals.
- **Are tired of feeling like a young person in an old person’s body**
- **Are looking to reduce dependence on Western medications**
- **Are frustrated with the conventional healthcare system**
- **Are willing to take responsibility for your own state of health, live in the state of power that results from this decision, and are willing to do positive things with that power.**

By now you probably know that **this is not a quick fix**. If you have been in pain or out of balance or alignment for a long time, or even if you have had a severe, acute injury or sudden onset of pain or discomfort, healing takes time and commitment. I am here to help you by using all the tools I have at my disposal, but ultimately, I am only a facilitator and guide on your path to healing (and rising above mediocrity!)

Most people want MORE than just relief from pain or a band-aid for their problems. If you want more, to be able to do the things you want well into old age, it is a good idea to be proactive rather than waiting for problems to manifest.



If you do this, you are already THINKING like someone who is ABOVE AVERAGE.

It is also likely that you have other good habits such as eating well, identifying and taking care of minor issues before they become bigger problems, and taking responsibility for creating the life you want. You are probably aging well physically while continuing to gain insight and wisdom that surpasses that of most of your peers. I am honored to work with such clients! **You are doing more than just barely getting by!**

VERY Important:

I am most interested in helping people do more than just get by till the problem inevitably arises again. **For this reason, when a patient and I decide to work together, I ask that they do not come in with the intention of only seeing me once or twice to “fix” a problem and then “see how it goes from there.”**

I ask all patients to follow the recommended treatment plan as they would if they were seeing trainer or a physical therapist or a chiropractor. The length depends on how long the conditions have existed and their severity, and recommendations are always honest and realistic. I recommend no more and no less than what I feel would work best for you. (See Common Questions for more information)

Chances are, you already understand. You know that commitment will give you the results you are looking for. **I am grateful** that I have such a great “tribe” so that can continue to put my efforts and energy into delivering the highest quality service I can.

Applying the Mindset: My Own Struggle



You may be wondering how this philosophy applies to your condition. Now that you know more...

I will use myself as an example. It took me a while to figure it all out, too, and finally learn that in order to keep going, **I have to take care of myself first.**

I often experience pain and stiffness in my left ankle, and lack of hip mobility in general, particularly on my right side. Occasionally, I experience more intense pain, even though I know I have not sustained any new injuries.

More often than not, even if my pain had manifested after a hard workout, the root cause was due to poor posture and/or movement patterns, trigger points, inflammation, degeneration, muscle imbalances, and even emotional states. **These root problems became more “solidified” in my body, leading to a cycle of pain, stiffness, and lack of performance. I could not continue down this path.**

Someone with chronic or even acute back or hip pain may also have root causes that have little to do with simply “throwing out the back.” **We are often taught that “some external force” is responsible for our pain or discomfort, not us.** All we need is a simple “adjustment” or pill and we can go right back to pretending we are the same we were 20 or 30 years ago without putting in any effort towards maintaining or improving our bodies or cultivating any sort of awareness, right? Wrong.

Unless you really were involved in a bad car accident or had a bad crash on the slopes, (moving a box or opening a door does not qualify) **it is most likely that poor posture, a weak “core,” poor movement patterns/habits, muscle imbalances, and quite possibly poor nutrition or internal imbalances, are the true root causes.** Any good health care professional will tell you the same thing.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

Now that I think about it, even those who experience a bad “crash” usually come out of it better when they are in reasonably good shape to begin with. This is the truth, and nobody is exempt. I certainly am not, nor does this come from a place of feeling superior to anyone. I have been through periods in my life in which I have been in pretty good shape and have done great things with my body that I am proud of.

But I have also sustained aches and pains and full -blown injuries due to sheer neglect, laziness and lack of awareness. (Although I like to use the dual excuses: “Being Too Busy” and “Living in My Head.”) I probably could have also done a better job with healing old injuries before some of them became chronic.

And then I realize, (when I am honest with myself) that I need to take action, but at the same time, be kind to myself. Hmmmmm.

My old injuries tend to haunt me when I am stressed out, not eating properly, or not getting enough sleep. Stress, lack of sleep, and poor diet are major contributors to pain and poor functioning in the body. Even degenerative changes that seem out of our control can still be managed to an extent, but this takes effort, commitment, a positive attitude, education, outside support, realistic expectations, and a nice shot of the right kind of motivation from time to time! Not easy, I know.

Currently, I am implementing an anti-inflammatory diet and eating more foods that balance the pH in my body. I am becoming more mindful. I am becoming more aware of when I am too much “in my head” and not in my body, and I take regular self-care breaks. I schedule regular treatments for myself.

It can be hard. As I write this, I am planning on snowboarding tomorrow. I’m too much “in my head.” I want to finish the final draft of this report and send it to the editor and formatter so that I can be done with this project. **At the same time, I am very grateful that I am able to do things like snowboarding at “my age.” I am also very aware of how much conscious effort it takes to be able to continue doing what I love.** So I will take a break and get “back into my body” and get “out of my head.” for a few moments.

I will be honest: staying pain free very likely requires regular maintenance on many levels. It is easy to take health, lack of pain, and mobility for granted.

I don’t know about you, but I am not ready to feel “old” in the sense that I feel like life has “hit me like a truck.” I want to keep going.

Challenges



I am here to help you, but I will also need your help and full investment!

I consider it to be my job to give you “homework” and create accountability for you. This could mean keeping a log of your nutrition, sleep, and stress patterns, doing a particular exercise, taking a specific herbal formula, or simply showing up for your appointments and remembering what it is like to simply relax and just “be.”

Just as a personal trainer cannot make progress with a client if the client is seeing the trainer once a week but is sitting on the couch and eating fast food for the remainder of the week, our time together can only really work if you also take responsibility for your health.

This can be tough. I myself face regular challenges:

Lack of Commitment after Initial Surge of Motivation

This is very common. Typically, someone is excited for the first few weeks. After that, the initial euphoria wears off and at about 4-6 weeks in, motivation is lost. This is why most people cancel gym memberships within months of signing up.

It does not mean that you are weak when you lose motivation, it simply means that it is necessary to constantly evaluate priorities, and to be HONEST about what you want. If you really want something, you will do what it takes to get it. If not, other things will compete for your time, money and attention, and distract you from your goal.

Often at this point it is important to create motivation by acknowledging progress, celebrating a landmark achievement, planning an event that will keep you motivated and challenged, or rewarding yourself. Allow yourself to be proud of yourself for creating new and good habits!

Fear

Sometimes people think they want something, but for some reason, they may find that they benefit from NOT achieving that goal. Anything that pushes us out of our comfort zones can cause us to undermine our goals, because it feels “safer” to remain in the same place. **This may sound very strange, but fear is not always obvious.** It often lurks just below the surface, residing at the subconscious level. For example, sometimes it is easier to remain injured as it may provide us with the benefit of “letting us off the hook” instead of forcing us to face our fears and pushing our limits.

I experienced this until I realized that I did not need to “prove” myself anymore, so injuries no longer served to “protect” me from going out into “battle” again. I learned to choose my battles. Some also find reward in gaining sympathy from others. Maybe much of this comes from the overall lack of kindness we exhibit towards ourselves and with each other in our culture.

Stress

We all have a certain amount of stress in our lives. Some stress is productive, some is not. Stress may motivate us into action, but the wrong kind will cause us to make poor decisions. **It is very easy to skip the very thing that keeps negative stress at bay and increases our sense of well-being and productivity.** You may have heard this before, but it is worth repeating: Showing up is the hardest part. Once you do, you will be glad you did.

Poor Nutrition

I will make no attempt to “sugar coat” this issue. Our diet, in this country, is referred to as the Standard American Diet (SAD) and this is indeed SAD. This diet is almost devoid of any nutritional value, and is full of known toxins. Yet most of us continue to delude ourselves that this is normal. “If everyone else is eating this way.. why shouldn’t I?” This delusion may not work at the conscious level, (most of us know better) but at a deeper level, it is easy to remain in a state of denial.

My practice focuses not on disease, but prevention, aging gracefully, and defying “entropy.” Entropy is the natural state of decline that takes place if we do not make conscious efforts towards healing, building, creating, balance, and order. I insist upon good nutrition as a foundation for my patients, if they truly want to see the results they seek.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

My advice is simple: No crazy diets. Simply eat whole, unprocessed, high-quality foods, and enjoy life. If you choose to work with me, I will give you more guidance in this area, based on your own personal constitution, preferences, and goals. Again, I cannot stress how important good nutrition is.

Acupuncture also works MUCH better with proper nutrition. Acupuncture encourages the body to heal itself, but you still need the building materials in order for those processes to happen and for functions to be enhanced.

For more complex conditions, I will refer you to a nutritionist or naturopath.

I know you can overcome these 3 difficult challenges!



Common Questions

Do I have to believe in acupuncture in order for it to work?

No.

See the [“7 common myths about acupuncture” blog!](#)

How long does it take to see results?

It depends on the condition. Is it chronic or acute? In most cases, pain will be reduced, often within the first few treatments. But if you have had your condition for over 6 months, the process will take longer. A typical plan consists of 3-10 weekly visits. We usually recommend a maintenance plan after the initial round of treatments, but someone with a very long-standing and severe condition may need even more treatments. We discuss all of this in the first appointment or consultation to find a solution that works for you.

Many clients enjoy their visits and want to keep coming back for regular monthly or bi-monthly treatments (Maintenance) The experience should also be pleasant, and is ALWAYS recommended. A few needles, moxa, or cupping, some body work or massage, and some deep relaxation is good for everyone. **It keeps patients out of “crisis” mode**, because let’s face it, life is stressful, and without a strategy, stress, entropy, and decline will catch up to us eventually. (If you are over 40, you probably do not need any further explanation!)

Maintenance helps with: (A very short list)

- Internal balance (hormone balance, immunity, digestion, sleep, energy, emotions, etc)
- Preventing muscle imbalances from manifesting in order to have a better experience with running, yoga class, or other passions
- Dealing with the physical requirements of work: Excess sitting, standing, or repetitive movements
- Preventing allergies from becoming a big problem each season
- Keeping inflammation down
- Preventing muscle tension from causing headaches
- Staying off meds

Do you take insurance?



Our clinic can issue you a Superbill or receipts for flex care plans so that your insurance company can reimburse you. No problem! But we do not take regular insurance, which requires the provider to be reimbursed.

We understand why people ask about insurance. Times are tough. More and more practitioners, however, including physicians and dentists, are opting out of taking insurance and deciding to remain “cash-only” practices. They choose to put more energy into providing better service instead of struggling with insurance companies or having to see multiple patients at the same time.

For people that see true value in a more comprehensive treatment plan, higher quality healthcare, or more personal and specialized attention, this is generally not an issue, and actually ends up being cheaper in the long run, in many cases

What should I expect from my first treatment? What will it be like? I feel a little anxious about it!

You can find answers to this question in the New Patients section on the website. For logistics such as what to wear, parking, and downloadable intake forms, go there.

And RELAX! We want your experience to be PLEASANT. (Imagine that!)

Parking is easy; there is plenty of parking at our clinic. If you will be running late, just give us a call.

If you are running early, no problem! We have massage chairs in our waiting room, as well as coffee, water, and tea.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

If you are brand new to acupuncture, you will be eased into it. You will see what the needle looks like (very thin) during a short demo to ease your mind. From there, the first needle is inserted. Usually anywhere from 4-12 needles are placed, depending on you, your condition, and comfort with needles. You may be left in the room to relax, or a practitioner may remain in the room with you, depending on your preference. We often use some manual therapy or cupping in our practice, which also feels very pleasant.

Still afraid of needles? No problem. We also use the Dolphin Neurostim™ device, which is a gentle way to deliver a mild current to an acupuncture point without using needles. Although needles are the best choice in some cases, this device is quite good for certain types of therapies (releasing scar tissue, relieving pain, and addressing tendonitis, for example) We have many tools at our disposal that can be used.

Do you associate healthcare visits with having a good overall experience? Sadly, for most of us, the answer is no. Maybe you have a great doctor, maybe not, but generally, many people are frustrated by several things:

- They do not feel heard
- They are offered a quick fix, or are told that there is “no problem”
- They have to wait hours to see the doctor

These things frustrate us too. We are here to truly LISTEN to you and your concerns.

How will I feel after a treatment?

In most cases, much better than when you walked in. Many people “float” out of the office with a smile on their face!

It is most common to feel good at the end of the treatment, but sometimes, there are mild “side effects” such as fatigue, soreness, emotional releases, or mild immune/detox responses.

Sometimes a person can feel more fatigued after an appointment. If you are already deficient and feeling “run down,” this can happen. We try to be proactive about this and recommend rest (if possible, or at least an easier workload) after an acupuncture treatment if it is determined that you are in a “deficient” state. VERY often, after acupuncture and rest, you will feel MUCH better. Sometimes patients even sleep during the treatment. This is a great way to further accelerate the healing process.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

Sometimes, not always, acupuncture and other therapies such as chiropractic can create a “healing response” or “crisis” which can create feelings of soreness, physical awkwardness as the body re-balances, mild rashes or breakouts as the body begins to heal itself and clear itself of toxins, and even emotional responses like crying or odd dreams. During acupuncture, we are “stirring up” or “waking up” the body’s natural healing responses, and sometimes this does not feel pleasant.

For example, if you are used to “guarding” or tightening up muscles in the back, shoulders, or hips, when these muscles are released, you may actually feel other muscles “protest” until your muscles and nervous system learn to move without the constant tension. You may even feel an emotional release, such as crying or increased anger. This is indeed because the mind and body are connected. (You will also be given some corrective exercises, if appropriate, to help you through this process)

Likewise, detoxification in the body may result in a temporary headache or increased skin breakouts. Sometimes things have to get a little worse before they get better.

Although they generally do not last long, these responses are very common when working on deep-seated and chronic issues. Just keep resting, eating well, doing your exercises, drinking lots of water, going to your scheduled appointments, and taking care of yourself.

This is why awareness and tracking of progress is even more vital so that you are encouraged to continue on with all your positive efforts!

How will acupuncture help me deal with chronic pain?

Acupuncture is excellent for chronic pain. (see above section on how acupuncture works) Quick fixes, like some anti-inflammatory medications, provide temporary relief but often hinder the healing process, restrict blood flow, and cause actual damage to the body.

It is also more difficult to “pinpoint” the ultimate cause or causes of chronic pain. For this reason, a more in-depth approach to treating the condition is the best way to go.

Can I use acupuncture for an acute injury?

Yes! We have worked with many patients with acute traumatic injuries, with great success in helping them to heal quickly and get back into doing what they love! But keep the following in mind:

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

1. This probably goes without saying, but our clinic does not claim to be an ER. The patients we see do not have life-threatening injuries, and if it is more appropriate to refer you to an M.D., we will.

2. Sometimes what looks like an acute injury can be the result of muscle imbalances, an accumulation of old injuries, poor posture, or other imbalances that will need to be addressed. This is especially true for most back and hip injuries, if you have had other injuries in the past, exercise sporadically, are overweight, have weak “core” muscles, or have an overall lack of mobility in your hips, spine, or other joints. We might have to dig a little deeper to resolve the injury, address the root causes, and break the pain/injury cycle. NO band-aids!

Should I try acupuncture now, even if I have decided to undergo surgery, see a physical therapist or a chiropractor?

YES!! we love working with other practitioners! Acupuncture can DEFINITELY help speed up post-surgical recovery and rehabilitation. It can also mitigate the side effects of chemotherapy in cancer patients.

Do you only treat pain, or can you help me with other things, like insomnia, digestive problems, or hot flashes?

Acupuncture can absolutely help with internal imbalances! When people think of acupuncture, they tend to think automatically of back pain and other kinds of pain. But the World Health organization has a long list of treatable complaints ranging from high blood pressure to infertility that acupuncture can help heal.

We have treated many of these conditions but we prefer to keep the focus a little narrower, by not trying to be “everything to everyone.” Our specialty is working with active people over 40 and addressing the health concerns that arise in this population, which include (but are not limited to) chronic injuries, arthritis, fatigue, menopausal symptoms, facial and jaw pain, adrenal fatigue or burn out, insomnia, digestive complaints, weight gain, some types of depression and anxiety, and general “anti-aging.”

How can I find out more about how you approach the treatment of certain conditions?

Chances are good that there is a blog about it!

Please visit our website at <http://www.littleton-acupuncture.com>

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

We enjoy writing blogs, case studies, and articles, but we especially enjoy the interaction we have with our patients. They are considered to be part of the “Tribe.” We would be honored to have you join in and participate. We are committed to treating YOU as an individual.

Sounds Good? Let's Begin!



I like to say that I am MORE than committed to the health of my patients. It is one of my favorite things to do, it keeps me going, It is the reason I show up every day. I want to do a little more than simply give you a great treatment.

I make sure that each new patient that walks through my door leaves with good information. I have found that the right balance of structure and flexibility produces the best results, helps patients feel more safe and cared for, and establishes trust in our relationship together.

I like to show my appreciation to those that believe in me, believe in themselves, and trust in positive outcomes by surprising them with rewards and gifts. I truly feel honored to work with "The Tribe!"

Julie

Patient Experiences

*Julie, by way of her weekly Yoga class at the Malley Senior Center, saved my life. Each week I feel stronger, more self-aware and healthier. The best result is my improved balance. When I injured my knee, she was an integral part of my rehabilitation. Through acupuncture, bodywork, and all the other things she does, I was back on both feet. Now, I enjoy my monthly appointments and consider them as key to my continuing good health. – **Bruce M.***

*I saw Julie for acupuncture before and directly after surgery in July, 2013. With her help, I was able to discontinue pain medication two days after surgery, and the healing process was much faster than expected. I appreciate Julie's holistic approach showing respect for all methods including Western medicine where appropriate. In addition to acupuncture, Julie's practice includes herbal medicine and bodywork, all of which helped me a great deal after surgery and also with anxiety issues. - **Bob J.***

*I have been seeing Julie for acupuncture treatments on a weekly basis for the last two months. I have COPD. She has treated me for this condition with acupuncture and bodywork and I have seen improvement in my overall condition. I definitely recommend Julie as an option to western medicine or in concert with western medicine. She is well educated in Chinese Herbal remedies. My experience with her is very positive; thus, I plan to continue treatment with her. - **Gerri J.***

*My rotator cuff problem was eliminated. I fought this problem for over a year, and the sessions and exercises Julie suggested have let me get my lifestyle back. Julie's explanations and gentle approach in helping ease a beginner into trying acupuncture is amazing. A true feeling of energy flowing or pulsing in my body left me in a very relaxed state of mind. - **Don Y.***

*I work as a career drummer and educator, so my job requires a high amount of physical output. With this type of work, I require a very specialized treatment and need to have someone who has an in-depth knowledge of anatomy. I went to Julie as a means to increase my general health, and ability to revive after long sessions, as well as to increase my focus and strengthen my mental drive. It has done all of the above in ways no other treatment has. I find my hands play more fluidly, my muscles recover faster, my energy level has increased, and my creative output has blossomed, which directed contributed to an overall performance boost.– **Lane P.***

*As a result of trying a new activity my hip was suddenly very painful. One treatment by Julie got me off the pain pills. The second treatment helped even more. I now have a monthly treatment with Julie for maintenance. .– **Colleen B.***



Part Two:

How Acupuncture Works: A Better Explanation

If you have ever researched acupuncture online, you have most likely found an explanation that looks like this:

“Energy (Qi) flows in channels (meridians) throughout the body and over its surfaces. These channels are rivers of energy, which are referred to as meridians. If an obstruction occurs in one of the meridians, the Qi is disrupted and cannot flow properly.”

Acupuncture has been around for thousands of years, because it works. However, **I can understand why the current explanation is not satisfactory.** In fact, the terms “qi “ and “meridians” as we know them were not used in classical Chinese medicine. (More on this later in the chapter)

Chinese medicine (CM) is very difficult for westerners to conceptualize. It is typically explained in terms of qi and meridians or energy pathways, but lately, more **biomedical explanations are available**, which I believe should be integrated into discussions about acupuncture and CM.

I hope that I can provide a better explanation for you. But first, I want to clear up a few myths and misconceptions about acupuncture and CM.



6 Common Myths About Acupuncture

Myth 1

Since it is not easy to explain, acupuncture is not a valid therapy. (Acupuncture does not work because we do not know HOW it works)

It is not easy to explain, but practitioners, as a whole, should still try. All of us must work at arriving at a satisfactory explanation, instead of remaining complacent and copying and pasting ONLY vague theories about “qi” and meridians on our websites.

On the other hand, some of the concepts involved in current biomedical theories, such as bioelectric activity, neurochemical and biochemical activity, the workings of the central nervous system, the endocrine system and its imbalances, and so on, are difficult to understand and explain even within our own western frame of reference.

For example, do you know how antidepressants work? And do they work on everyone? Even modern medicine is still trying to find answers to these questions.

We must also take into consideration that there is more than one working theory about the mechanism of acupuncture.

This makes it quite a daunting task for a practitioner, like myself, to take all this information, sort it out, and explain in a way that a layperson can understand.

But I will try!

Acupuncture, or CM, still remains largely misunderstood. **Even though we KNOW it “works,” I believe that we should still strive to know more. Intellectual curiosity, scrutiny, and critical observation will continue to advance CM.** CM and its practitioners NEED to keep asking questions and looking for answers, just as much as we need to educate the public about what makes it unique and useful.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

At the same time, it is necessary to encourage the general public to engage in a different perspective. This, in turn, I think, will advance our own modern western medicine (WM). Both types of medicine need each other in this day and age.



SKEPTICISM VS. A CLOSED MIND

Sadly, there are also many people online who have dedicated their lives to “debunking” acupuncture and CM, despite the fact that they are very poorly educated about it. It seems as if some have already made up their minds to NOT understand it, so they simply look for whatever they can find to support their own agenda. I do not spend much time worrying about them.

Skepticism itself IS healthy, if it provides fuel for intelligent debate, discussion, and further inquiry. I have gone through many periods of skepticism myself, and I am not one to rely on blind faith. Everything can and should be questioned in a constructive manner, in my opinion.

But if something repeatedly helps me feel better... if it eases the pain of an old ankle injury or helps me sleep without side effects, it seems silly to dismiss it. I am, after all, a practical person. If there is a non-invasive way to soothe a simple case of indigestion or avoid knee surgery, and it works fantastically, count me in!

In the end, what really matters?

1. The (informed) decisions that an individual makes about his or her own path to healing
2. Results
3. The skill of the practitioner
4. The willingness of the patient to commit fully to his or her healing.

This applies to everything from a simple herbal tea to major surgery. For example, your orthopedic surgeon would ask you to be committed to your healing after surgery, and just like any good health care practitioner, will I ask you to do the same when you work with me.

Myth 2

Double blind studies are the only way to measure the effectiveness of a particular therapy, healing modality, herb, or drug.

Yes, CM benefits from the application of the Scientific Method. No doubt.

It is also important to consider that CM is customized for each individual, and this makes it inherently difficult to measure. One of the issues that should be addressed when reviewing studies in Chinese medicine is the existence of methodological problems faced by researchers in their attempts to apply reductionist, scientific paradigms to clinical methods whose efficacy may depend on the interplay of a variety of non-reducible factors.



Whoa.. that's lots of scientific jargon there. What does that mean?

It means that the sum of individual parts is capable of producing an effective “whole,” and that each “whole” is unique. This is the true definition of “holistic.”

Here is an example: When we study the isolated compounds in plants and use them to research, develop, patent, and manufacture drugs, this is REDUCTIONIST rather than HOLISTIC thinking. **Reductionist thinking is not a BAD thing, but it is not the ONLY way to think.** When we isolate compounds, they may provide a unique benefit, but at the same time we can also lose the medicinal benefits that the ENTIRE PLANT delivers. Plant chemistry and herbal medicine are fascinating sciences, and we still have a lot to learn. These sciences provide a great opportunity to study complex chemical compounds as well as the synergy of these compounds when added together.

This is what makes nutrition such a difficult subject to study and research. It does not mean that we should not study it, but recognize just how complex it really is. **An overly reductionist approach is not very useful and should only be a starting point when working with individuals**

as opposed to the general public. What works for one person may not work for another. This is why there are so many conflicting diet books out there!

Even with the reductionist approach, there is still much we do not know. For example, the exact mechanism in which antidepressants work is still a mystery. Yet they are still in use because they provide a benefit to many. Much controversy still exists in regards to many medications, and just as with acupuncture or CM, more testing and study is needed. However, if a study concludes that “more testing is needed” this is not necessarily a sign that what is being tested has no therapeutic validity.

Practicing medicine is just as much of an art as science. An example in CM: Many studies focus on individual acupuncture points, or on one individual herb. This is great, a good start. But it is the synergy of points, (the correct combination of points), or the correct herbal blend based on an individual and his or her current imbalance, that makes CM work. It took many years of trial-and-error in order to arrive at such a sophisticated approach. CM has clearly withstood the test of time.

It is also important to note that in much of China, it is traditionally considered unethical to conduct double blind studies or to create a control group that does not receive the best care possible. To them, it may be equivalent to denying an ill person proper medical treatment.

Furthermore, the practice of acupuncture is dependent on the practitioner. This makes it hard to compare studies given the variety of modalities and diagnostic approaches used in different clinical settings. Many do not use just one technique, but several.

Still, none of the things I mentioned above should be excuses for exemption from further study. **Modern scientific research is still a good thing for CM.** More and more promising studies are taking place. For example, researchers are beginning to look at acupuncture using MRI. This method of studying acupuncture is fascinating. Rather than concentrating on perceptions, which still has value, but can be misled by placebo or prejudices, the MRI studies look directly at how acupuncture changes brain activity.

I tend to favor a meta-analysis approach (combining the results of several well-designed studies guided by peer review) that focuses on a particular condition or demographic group.

A great example is a study about using CAM (Complimentary and Alternative Medicine) for the treatment of PTSD in combat veterans. A recent meta- analysis concluded that CAM, and in particular, acupuncture, can provide great relief for combat veterans suffering from PTSD. This was the topic for a research paper I wrote:

Authors: Strauss JL, Coeytaux R, McDuffie J, Nagi A, Williams JW .

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

Source: Washington (DC): Department of Veterans Affairs; 2011 Aug.

VA Evidence-based Synthesis Program Reports.

I invite you to check out various PubMed studies on the internet.

In conclusion, scientific study is not the be-all-end-all for determining how medicine is applied, but it is important that CM continues to be studied via modern scientific method. I believe that Chinese medicine can and should evolve and adapt to modern times, while still retaining its original essence.

I also believe that modern western medicine and CM can work in a synergistic manner for many people. This is what integrated medicine really means.

Myth 3

Acupuncture is about needles. And nerves. Ouch.



Acupuncture DEFINITELY affects the nervous system, but **acupuncturists are NOT “aiming” for nerves, and it is NOT supposed to be painful.** We use very, very, fine needles to create a biological response, but pain is not necessary (and is usually counterproductive) in order to elicit the response. **The needles we use are very fine and thin,** not like the hollow, hypodermic needles you may have had negative experiences with in the past.

Typical responses include “a small pinch” to “nothing” upon insertion of a needle. Afterwards, some feel a sensation of a mild ache, a “buzzing” feeling, warmth, or nothing at all and simply go to sleep. The majority feels a sense of well-being. If the goal is to release a trigger point, sometimes there is the momentary pain of muscle release, but this again has nothing to do with trying to hit a nerve. We avoid needling large nerves.

Although needles are often the best choice, we also have many other alternatives to needles. Currently we use the Dolphin Neurostim™ device, which delivers a targeted microcurrent into an acupuncture point, trigger point, damaged or scarred tissue which has a very similar effect to acupuncture in many cases.

Myth 4

Acupuncturists use needles, and that is it... that is all they do.

Not true! Sometimes I wish we could change the name “acupuncture” to something completely different; a name that is more descriptive of the “system” of modalities that we use. Most of us are skilled at acupuncture, but many also use Chinese massage and myofascial release, moxibustion (a form of heat therapy) cupping, herbal medicine, and nutrition, as well as some western modalities such as kinesiotaping, laser acupuncture, Active Release techniques, and more.

It is this system of modalities that works the “magic” of “acupuncture” and CM, and every practitioner has a unique system. Many acupuncturists also focus on one or a few areas of expertise, such as sports medicine, women’s health, or digestive dysfunctions.

Myth 5



I tried it once, and it did not work. Therefore, acupuncture does not work.

Although I seek to achieve the best results possible from the first treatment, acupuncture is a cumulative process, much like going to the gym, Pilates, or yoga class. This is especially true if you have a complex or chronic condition. For example, someone does not simply “throw out their back” or develop digestive issues overnight. The healing process will also not happen overnight.

Very often, patients leave feeling somewhere between “a little better” to fantastic. Sometimes, patients may perceive that nothing is happening unless progress is tracked meticulously. Sometimes it is a combination of both. In our clinic, I make sure that a baseline is established. After each treatment assessments are made.

These assessments can be:

- Objective, such as gait analysis, range of motion, or blood lab reports from an M.D.
- Subjective, such as perceived pain, quality of sleep, moods, or severity and frequency of hot flashes and night sweats.

Changes or lack of change is noted. It is also important in some cases for the patient to keep a log or journal to track progress and notice habits and obstacles that may be hindering progress. (We all have our unique challenges!) **If only small changes are taking place after 5-6 treatments and the condition is a long-standing and chronic, this is STILL progress!**

Sometimes it might be necessary to switch acupuncturists, if after 5 or 6 treatments you are still not seeing any improvement at all. **It could be that your acupuncturist is not the right one for you.** Some are very good at treating infertility or digestive complaints, for example, but know very little about the anatomy and biomechanics of muscle, bone, and fascia, of movement patterns and dysfunctions, trigger point theory, etc. Conversely, a sports medicine specialist is probably not going to be your first choice for treating women's health issues.

Not all acupuncturists can be everything to everyone, and nor should they pretend to be. Ask what they specialize in. They should be honest about their strengths AND limitations.

Occasionally practitioners encounter patients that are not responsive to acupuncture. It is not common, but it does happen. **The same goes for any other kind of therapy or medicine, traditional or alternative.** The chances of achieving results are very good, however, with a good practitioner, a system, and a number of tools in the toolbox.

It is rare to encounter a patient that expects a practitioner to assess, troubleshoot, diagnose, and completely resolve a complex problem in one treatment, but it happens. As a practitioner it is better to educate people up front about realistic expectations than promise something unrealistic, only to have a patient perpetuate the myth that acupuncture "does not work."

This should go without saying, (for most of us) but it is very important for the patient to participate in the healing process. If a patient has a poor diet, is not doing his or her exercises or not taking herbs as directed, the desired results cannot be expected. CM is about encouraging education, patient responsibility and personal power instead of waiting for a "rescue" when preventable problems manifest. For some, this might be a challenging mind-shift.

Myth 6

Acupuncture is only for treating pain.

I can understand why this myth lingers on, but although acupuncture and CM do a great job with back and hip pain, shoulder pain, etc., they do a LOT more. They can treat digestive complaints, allergies, menstrual irregularities, insomnia, stress and anxiety, to name but a few.

Other things to consider:

When we think of only treating “pain,” chances are we are not getting to the root cause of the problem. Seeing an acupuncturist with only the intention of immediate pain relief is indeed part of the “take a magic pill” mentality that our culture is steeped in. True healing also needs to take place, and that process is not always linear and sometimes feels uncomfortable.

Sometimes relieving pain will help the healing process, but sometimes simply “masking” pain without regard to correctly diagnosing, treating, and encouraging the patient to participate in his or her own healing will do more harm than good. Pain is the body’s way of telling us that something is not right. Acupuncture is NOT just about managing symptoms, but treating the ROOT CAUSE.

Common Terms Used In Acupuncture

HOLISTIC AND WELLNESS: WHAT DO THESE WORDS REALLY MEAN?



I will be honest: these two terms are so overused that they no longer seem to carry much weight or meaning. (I stubbornly refuse to use them in my marketing materials!) In context, however, they can be useful.

The word “Holistic” is NOT just another term for “alternative” nor is it a simple marketing term. It simply describes the interaction between parts of a whole. The sum of each individual part makes a greater whole, and it is impossible to isolate (reduce) one part of the whole in order to better understand the complex interactions contained in a system such as the human body, a cup of medicinal herbs, an ecological system, or even the state of the economy!

When we treat a person holistically, we treat the whole person. For example, if someone has a headache, we are not simply trying to “cure the headache” by taking a pill. The nature of the headache and how it is treated is dependent on the individual, his or her environment, and what is happening within the mind and body on that particular point in time.

For example:

- Is this person exhausted?
- Did they eat recently? Drink enough water?
- How is their liver functioning?
- What is going on emotionally?
- What muscles are holding tension?

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

- What is happening in terms of blood flow?
- If female, where are they at in their cycle?
- Were they exposed to cold air or a cold wind recently?
- Are they in the first (almost imperceptible) stages of a cold or flu?
- What meds are they taking?
- What other physiological events are happening in their body at the time?
- What is their usual state of functioning and level of health?

If several of these things are going on at once, the variables will affect each other, creating even more possible outcomes!

Asking these questions may seem obvious, and that's because it is! Indeed, we DO ask a lot of questions during a typical CM intake.

To treat a headache or any other condition holistically takes time and thoughtful consideration. It requires broad thinking; to be able to consider a dynamic approach, as well as the fact that multiple, changeable events are occurring at a given time. In addition, we have to “think in a different language” as CM practitioners!

Uncovering the Root Cause

What if someone has multiple symptoms that seem unrelated? A rash, joint aches, and heartburn for example? In CM, the root cause may be the same for all of these symptoms. **There is a saying in CM: “One cause, many diseases.” Again, in WM, often a patient is given drugs to suppress the symptoms, but the root cause is never addressed.**

Although often necessary to help many people lead a normal life (diabetics, for example) **drugs do have a tendency to suppress important functions in the body.** For this reason, people have to keep taking a drug, and then more drugs, and so on. Soon the body is no longer able to regulate itself. This is a shame, because the body has a remarkable ability to heal itself if we allow it.

Wellness is another vague term that has a different meaning for each individual. For one person, it could mean having the strength to get out of bed in the morning or fight off a serious illness, For others, it could mean rising above mediocrity in order to accomplish a major goal. Either one of these two scenarios requires enormous strength and will!

Mediocrity only FEELS like maintaining a status quo. However, this is a delusion. Such a status quo is really a slow, steady, insidious decline that remains unnoticed until one day there is a wake-up call, and a person is suddenly jarred out of his or her comfort zone.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

One could say that wellness is defined as the opposite of being in that mediocre state of mind, or perhaps also as the opposite of simply managing diseases that have already manifested.

And here is a great quote from an ancient Chinese medical text about the difference between mediocre and excellent health care:

“The superior physician makes it his prerogative to treat disease when it has not yet structurally manifested, and prevents being in the position of having to treat disorders that have already progressed to the realm of the physical. The low level physician finds himself salvaging what has already manifested in physical form, and treating what is already ruined.”

And isn't this also a cheaper and less stressful option in the long run?

QI AND ITS MANY INTERPRETATIONS



What the heck is Qi, (pronounced “chee”) anyway? Is it energy?

Well, yes and no. Chinese Medicine was introduced to the Western world by a Frenchman in the 19th century named George Soulie de Morant. He spent a lot of time in China as a diplomat, and spoke fluent Chinese. He saw the benefits of CM and wanted to bring it to France. He ended up translating a lot of medical texts into French. Unfortunately, the term for “qi” got lost in translation. Our perception of it is different than the concept of qi in CM. The original meaning had more to do with the energy we get from oxygen. This was understood many years before the development of western medicine, as we know it today.

But the “Qi as energy” model still can be useful. Energy can be explained in a lot of different ways, especially when we are talking about life itself. I like both the mechanistic and poetic descriptions of qi.

The Poetic Interpretations of Qi

Qi is often described as vital energy. Pranayama offers the closest non-western explanation to qi I can find. Oxygen, life force, and bioenergy are some of the western terms that offer a glimpse into the essence of qi. Indeed, the meaning of qi has many dimensions. It invites a lot of questions about life on this planet, science, how we interact with our environment, and philosophical questions such as what constitutes life itself.

What is the difference between something that is obviously alive, in the fullest sense of the word, and something that is not? And is there a continuum? I do not think that any of us are either simply alive or dead, but rather somewhere on a continuum, headed in one direction or the other.

Qi and Nature

Certainly, as humans, we benefit from being in nature. **When we breathe clean air, move, eat clean foods, drink clean water, get adequate rest, and are skilled at coping with stress, we have more “qi” or “energy.”** We can also receive energy from being around certain people or surroundings. Some people and places feel better than others. Anything that is not healthy for us or does not feel “right” can “deplete” or “stagnate” qi. This is not something that can be measured, but certainly we cannot dismiss it.

Energy or qi in this sense is dynamic. It does not stay in one place. For example, think about eating fresh produce from your garden. This food is not “denatured” or processed. It still contains much of which gives us our own life energy. Our bodies know what to do with it. Food with life energy contains all the things we need, (macronutrients, vitamins, enzymes, phytonutrients) in the right form, and this potential energy can be easily converted to other types of energy. (Mechanical, heat, etc.)

Real food, full of “qi” does not require the liver to work overtime, alter cellular structures, or disrupt our hormonal processes. On the other hand, eating food that is “denatured” and overly-processed, has the opposite effect on us.

I’ll have 12 oz. of Qi for lunch, my favorite raw greens juice!



The ultimate source of life energy is the sun. Again, this takes some time to fully comprehend, to wrap our minds around, so to speak. When someone says that this fresh food is “full of life and qi” this is what they mean. You can see either abundance of qi or lack of it in a person almost instantly, in their complexion, the way they move, and the condition of their bodies.

Good quality food, air, water, and surroundings can provide us with good “qi.” This is holistic thinking in the “macrocosmic” sense. In other words, we cannot really separate ourselves from our environment.

More about Qi: Bioelectrical Explanation of Qi, Acupuncture Points, and Meridians



Maybe you want to dive a little deeper and investigate how acupuncture works. If so, read on! Or maybe you are simply satisfied that it works for you without thinking too much about it. In that case, you can skip the next section or skim over it.

After much research and editing, I came up with some possible explanations for “qi” on the **microcosmic level**. This is the “qi” or energy that some feel when the needles are placed in various acupuncture points. Some report a feeling of heaviness, aching, lightness, a “buzz”, or a deep feeling of well-being.

What is really happening?

There are several theories that explain how acupuncture works from a bioelectrical and biochemical perspective. The nervous system itself works on these principles. Nerves are excited by an external stimulus, and there is a subsequent polarization or depolarization in the nerves.

The spaces between nerves, called synapses, produce chemicals called neurotransmitters that have either an “excitatory” or “inhibitory” effect on the next nerve in line. (post-synaptic nerve). THIS IS NOT about sticking a needle in a nerve! The mechanism still acts on the nervous system, but in a more subtle way.

Many processes in the body are dependent on bioelectricity or ionic flow, such as cellular metabolism.

Acupuncture Points, Needles, Ions, and Current



There are a few theories that describe the mechanism behind acupuncture needles and the effect they have on acupuncture points and meridians. These theories have to do with ions, ion flow in the body and within a circuit, electric fields, and the physiological characteristics of acupuncture points.

Acupuncture points and meridians tend to have different electrical properties, (such as more conductivity) although there are challenges in measuring electrical properties on the surface of the skin. Some studies have overcome this, but measuring electrical activity on the skin (as in a polygraph) is a challenge due to so many variables, such as moisture on the skin, pressure variables, etc.

So what does this mean? Here are 4 theories that may offer some insight.

(Keep in mind that the meaning of theory, when talking about the scientific method, is different from the casual use of the word theory in our everyday language, which implies that something is merely conjecture or a guess.)

Theory #1

This one is the hardest to grasp, but bear with me!

Needles act as antennas, which interact with atmospheric ions, distorting the field and attracting ions in a similar manner to a lightning rod. This creates a **very** small current in the body, (if it is grounded) which travels along the path of least resistance. Since acupuncture points and meridians have been shown, (with proper equipment) to be areas of decreased resistance or higher conductivity than the rest of the body, these meridians act as conductors, in a sense. This current is carried via electrolyte ions that are always present in body fluids.

“It has been demonstrated that a conductive needle protruding from a conductive surface in an electric field will cause more ions to arrive at the surface than would be the case if the needle were not there”. Niels Jonassen, "Acupuncture and Atmospheric Ions"

www.ce-mag.com/archive/03/01/mrstatic.html

Theory #2

It has to do with ion flow in a closed circuit. A complete circuit with an electric potential (a + charge on one end, and a – charge on the other) causes ions to flow from one direction (polarity) to another. [This is similar to the way a battery works.](#)

This effect can be accomplished with ion pumping cords, which were first developed and explored by Yoshio Manaka in the 1940s. Ions or electrons flow from the negatively charged source and collect at the end of the conductor to the positively charged object. They flow from one needle, through the cord, to the other needle, and through the body, which acts as the other half of the circuit. This method was first used to pump potassium ions (K+) away from the burn site in burn victims to facilitate healing.

annecdevereux.wix.com/practice.../applying-physics-to-acupuncture Aug 15, 2012

Indeed, influencing bioelectricity can have an effect on regulating the chemistry of our bodies. Numerous studies have shown promise that acupuncture, via bioelectricity, can regulate the release of natural opioids and other neurotransmitters as well as influence and regulate hormones, healing, and immune responses.

Theory #3

The vascular-interstitial theory, This theory states that acupuncture affects the electrical system in the vascular and connective tissue by creating a closed-circuit (one direction only) transport of electrical energy. This can have a direct effect on injured tissues and related organs on a specific pathway or arrangement of fascia.

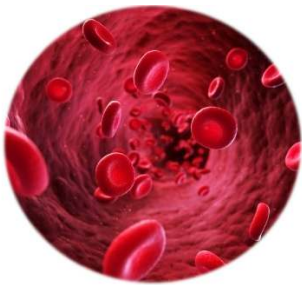
According to these 3 theories, acupuncture meridians are based on ionic flow. We now know that the movement of these ions creates a very small current. Metabolic functions and energy production on a cellular level are absolutely dependent on ion flow. If meridians are simply the paths of least resistance, any current flowing through them is what we may be referring to when we say we are “moving qi”. When this happens, the nervous system itself is affected, as well as connective tissue, (including fascia) epithelial tissue, (skin, the lining of the lungs, etc.) muscles, and body fluids.

But there is yet another theory:

Theory #4

Acupuncture points are said to have an increased concentration of nerve endings, mast cells, and capillaries. Because of this, acupuncture can have a direct effect on blood chemistry. This is related to the Blood Chemistry Theory in CM.

Studies on certain acupuncture points have produced strong evidence that these points can directly affect blood chemistry. For example, ST36, a point located one hand-width below your knee, is used to treat many conditions by raising red and white blood cell counts. (I would need another entire chapter to fully describe the history and benefits of ST36!)



Acupuncture is also said to increase blood flow and blood perfusion to areas that may not receive much blood flow, thus facilitating healing. This explains why acupuncture works well in treating tendonitis, as tendons and ligaments are slow to heal due to limited blood supply.

So there you have it, bioelectricity and biochemistry theories may offer an explanation of the mechanism behind how acupuncture works, in terms of qi.

Note: In ancient China, “meridians” were discovered not by the use of modern testing methods and equipment, but by trial and error. The findings were recorded in a painstaking manner. In addition, many dissections took place, and via this process, many interconnections were discovered between vasculature, the nervous system, muscles, and connective tissue on specific “meridians” or pathways.

Today, many more dissections have been done in order to learn more about fascia and connective tissue. I suggest reading **Anatomy Trains by Thomas W. Myers**, an excellent book that illustrates just how complex and sophisticated the network of connective tissue can be. **Interestingly, the arrangement of fascia in the body almost directly corresponds with the Chinese meridians.**

This is why your acupuncturist may place a needle on the inside of your lower leg to elicit a healing response or reduce pain and tension in the muscles in the inner thigh and groin, or a point on the inside of your wrist (heart meridian) to relax you and ease chronic anxiety.

Still with me?

“Qi is more than just electricity and chemistry”



If we still want to talk about qi as “energy”, it helps to remember that energy comes in many forms: Electrical, magnetic, gravitational, nuclear, heat, light, sound, and chemical. All of these can have an effect on the body or any life form. The way our physical bodies, our brains, and our emotions process this information is not well understood by modern medicine, but obviously is well worth consideration!

Trying to describe Qi is like trying to describe how LIFE works. In Chinese medicine, qi is a theoretical concept to help us understand diagnostic pictures and make functional relationships within our bodies. It is also tangible in form and function when we think of it in terms of oxygen, blood flow, the substances contained in the blood that make life possible, or the flow of ions that act as the “engine” of life functions.

To conclude, acupuncture points and meridians are functional, not structural entities, and it is the manipulation of these functional entities that create changes. This is the basis of acupuncture.

The discussion about qi is worthy of an entire book, and I have only touched the surface. One could also explore the powerful influence the mind has on the body, as well as the power of interaction between human beings.

For example, how does simply touching or talking to another human being elicit a healing response, and what is the science behind it? Do we need to know, or just trust?

This is up to you to decide.

YING, YANG, AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN OUR INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTS



Yin and yang (pronounced yahng) is a poetic way of describing polarities or opposites. It is a way to describe the continuum of “energy” that flows between two opposite poles. This is because everything that is contained in the universe is not static, but dynamic. The only thing that never changes is change itself. Examples of yin and yang are abundant in weather patterns, the study of economics, ecology, and anything else that is dependent on a dynamic balance.

It is the balance of these two poles that constitutes health (homeostasis) in the body. These two poles are related and inseparable from each other despite being opposites.

Yin and Yang are interdependent and interchangeable. A disturbance in the balance of Yin and the Yang in the body results in illness, infections, injury etc.

But what is the difference BETWEEN yin and yang? Here are some examples.

YIN

- Damp
- Cold
- Darkness, night
- Moon
- Autumn, winter
- Passive
- Water
- Introspection, reflection
- Slowness
- Calm

- Quietness
- Contraction
- Storage
- Substance.. like a candle
- Sinking
- Female
- The front or inside of the body

YANG

- Dryness
- Heat
- Lightness, day
- Sun
- Spring, summer
- Active
- Fire
- Change
- Quickness
- Upheaval
- Loudness
- Expansion
- Transformation and growth
- Energy.. like a flame
- Rising
- Male
- The back or outside of the body

Neither is good or bad. Both are necessary. **It is NOT so good if one dominates the other for too long. This usually leads to the other extreme. Examples of yin and yang were not only prevalent in medicine in ancient China, but in other areas of life, such as war and politics.**

The theory Yin and Yang in medicine is closely related to the concept of homeostasis, or balance, in the body. Homeostasis can be described as the ability to adapt to an external environment. Because there are so many regulating processes that maintain homeostasis, it would take pages and pages to write about them.

Let's take a common cold and hot flashes for example. Guess which one is yin and which one is yang? At the very beginning stages of a cold, for example, one can have a headache, chills, and

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

an aversion to cold and wind due to vasoconstriction and muscular tension. (Later on, a fever could result, and yin turns into yang.)

During a hot flash, the opposite happens. Blood vessels dilate to release heat, the face may flush, and there is a very intense feeling of heat. This is but one aspect of yin and yang; there are many. The body is simply trying to regulate itself. CM just gives the body a little “nudge” away from the extreme to help restore balance, instead of creating a compensatory imbalance. In CM, we don’t talk about “colds” and “hot flashes,” but what is happening in the body in the language of CM. (Still cold or heat, in this case) However, we have to be able to tell YOU what is going on in your own language.

External Environment and Our Health



Chinese Medicine excels in recognizing the link between the human body and external environments. For example, a person who lives in a cold, damp environment will respond and adapt to that environment and perhaps develop chronic conditions of a more “damp” nature. **Here in Colorado we live in a dry (yang) climate, (and at high altitude) so we have a tendency to develop “dry” or “yin deficient” conditions.** (Moisture is a yin substance)

Our external environment influences simple maladies such as headaches and common colds, as well as full-blown chronic conditions and diseases. For example, people who live in Colorado are more likely to develop dry, “yin deficient” coughs than those who live in damper climates. I see this all the time. I myself have experienced dry, hacking coughs in the middle of the night at the tail end of a respiratory infection. Humidifiers help a little, but no drugstore over-the-counter remedy seems to help. There are some simple Chinese herbal remedies that work VERY well for this condition.

In damper climates, a cold may present in an entirely different way, and may require an entirely different treatment plan and different herbal remedies.

Yin and Yang and Our Internal Environment

We are all individuals. Some people naturally have more “yin” or “yang” constitutions. A person who is quiet, “runs cold,” has a pale face, is more susceptible to having problems with “dampness” (sinus infections, cysts, fluid retention, weight gain) is generally considered to have a more “yin” constitution. Likewise, a person who has a loud voice, runs warm, has a ruddy complexion, and is more susceptible to problems with “heat” such as inflammation or high blood pressure, is considered more “yang.” This is a very simplified example; most people are more complex.

Let’s take a closer look at our example of 2 opposite poles: Heat and cold. What does too much “heat” look like in CM? **“Excess heat” can manifest as (but is not necessarily equivalent to) fever, infection, and inflammation. People in our culture tend to be chronically inflamed.** “Excess” cold also exists. An example: an old injury that becomes more painful in cold weather.

In our culture, imbalances are more likely to result from internal “abuse” than external. We tend to have poor dietary habits, sedentary lifestyles, and more chronic stress than our ancestors did. This can certainly set the stage for a “heat” imbalance (which can later turn into a “cold” imbalance) Our ancestors did not have climate control and modern medicine to protect them from many infectious diseases, and thus were more influenced by external factors.

It is important to remember that heat and cold imbalances can have both internal and external root causes. **Knowing these root causes allows us to be far more proactive about our health and address minor imbalances before they become chronic conditions or disease.**

Deficient Heat and Cold

It can get even more complex! A person can also have “deficient” heat or cold conditions. “Deficient heat” is a perception of heat when there is no actual fever. It can present when a person does not have enough “yin” (dry, dead twigs ignite faster than living, moist twigs) “Deficient cold” is really just an absence of heat. A person with “deficient heat” may have a flushed face, always feel like they have a low-grade fever, or experience night sweats. A person who has a “deficient cold” condition will generally be wearing a thick sweater or jacket even when the external temperature is relatively warm, and can never seem to get warm. **Very often there is a hormonal imbalance when deficient heat or cold presents.**

Heat and Cold are only two aspects of yin and yang, but very important ones. The concept of Ying and Yang provides a poetic but functional way to explain concepts such as homeostasis (balance).

Excess and Deficiency

Excess is best described as something that our body needs to get rid of. This can include an overly tight muscle, an acute injury with inflammation, an outside pathogen (a virus, a bacterial infection) certain types of headaches, or a bad sushi dinner that has you confined to the bathroom. Drugs in WM often treat excess conditions. Examples include antibiotics, blood pressure medications, and anti-inflammatories.

Deficiency, on the other hand, implies that the body is lacking energy, and is in need of what we call in CM “tonification.” When someone feels achy, “run down,” or has a chronic injury, anemia, fibromyalgia, certain types of headaches, is recovering from surgery, chemotherapy, or antibiotics, we can say that they have a “deficient“ pattern in CM. In WM, deficient conditions are usually treated with supplements such as vitamins, enzymes, macronutrients such as protein, thyroid meds, etc.

Again I will say that western medicine is fantastic at what it does. But often, western approaches can solve one imbalance, only to create another. For example, antibiotics are often quite necessary. They are designed to rid the body of something that is potentially life threatening, but they are NOT a health tonic. They unfortunately cause collateral damage. My favorite analogy: Antibiotics are like the sprinkler system that puts out the fire, but now, there is water damage to recover from!

Sometimes We Actually Speak “English”



Now you know some basic terms that we use in acupuncture and CM. But we can also speak “English!”

Acupuncturists use CM terms often, but we also need to be able to communicate to those who are not trained in CM. That means you, the patient, but also your doctor. We may be giving you a diagnosis of “kidney yin deficiency with deficient heat” but what you are experiencing in your

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

own language is hot flashes, night sweats, and a feeling of malaise in the early evening. If we were to talk to your doctor, he or she might explain the imbalance in terms of estrogen and progesterone levels.

Or perhaps you are also experiencing anxiety or depression, and a combination of medication and acupuncture works best for you at the moment. Your acupuncturist needs to have some technical knowledge about the meds you are taking in order to give you the best treatment plan. Even though side effects are almost non-existent, we are interested in maximizing benefits for you.

WHY WE NEED TO SPEAK IN BOTH LANGUAGES:

- 1.** We NEED to know how to communicate with M.D.'s and patients in order to maintain credibility AND to help you!
- 2.** It is extremely helpful to have knowledge about both types of medicine in order to better understand how they function together
- 3.** We must be able to refer to an M.D. when appropriate, and without WM knowledge this is impossible.

To summarize the above 3 concepts, let's use the example of a patient who is seeing me for shoulder pain. If I write a blog about shoulder pain, I am going to include western terms such as abduction strength, passive range of motion, anterior instability, joint capsule, etc. I will include concepts such as origin and insertion of rotator cuff muscles, common injuries to the shoulder joints, the mechanics of injury and movements that aggravate the pain, etc. I will be educated about types of surgery performed and new surgical techniques used by the best orthopedic surgeons.

If I were to write ONLY about treating meridians and moving qi (which is part of the treatment) I think that I would be much less credible as a practitioner, with good reason!

I can apply my knowledge of CM, but also think in anatomical terms. "

"I use meridian theory, but I also use my knowledge and skill in anatomy and biomechanics, pain referral patterns, palpation, muscle testing, etc. This provides the best opportunity for a successful treatment. Both approaches enhance each other!"

I also know what “red flags” to look out for. In cases of instability and increasing weakness, it is best to refer the patient out to an M.D. because conservative treatment can fail when the shoulder joint becomes more and more unstable due to a tear, lesion, or joint laxity. (Only an M.D. can make that diagnosis.) Eventually, surgery and physical therapy may be necessary. Some types of shoulder pain may actually be referred pain from organ pathology. This is not common, but it is important to rule out or treat a potential heart, liver, or gallbladder problem if it is suspected, and again, only a doctor can determine that.

An acupuncturist will never make a western diagnosis. That is up to your doctor. Many of us do enjoy working with M.D.’s and more and more M.D.’s are willing to refer their patients to acupuncturists, but in order for that to happen, it is up to acupuncturist to understand and use western medical terminology when appropriate.

TONGUE AND PULSE DIAGNOSIS



Chinese tongue diagnosis is a tool used by acupuncturists and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners. Your tongue plays a unique role in understanding your body’s constitution. When a practitioner looks at your tongue, he or she looks at very specific characteristics that manifest, and learns a lot about the interior of your body and the state of your health.

Tongues differ from one person to the next. Normally they are pink with a very thin white coat. They can change according to the health of a person. Your tongue provides a window into how your body is functioning, and will change as you age or experience improvements or declines in health.

When I feel run down and “blood deficient,” my tongue gets quite pale. A smoker might have a dry, red tongue with a slight yellow coat. I have seen very red tongues, tongues with cracks, purplish-tinged tongues, and tongues with thick coats or none at all. All tell us something about the condition of the body from a CM perspective.

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

One can tell some things about the state of someone's health by pulse diagnosis. Indeed, when I was involved with racing and coaching, our team had each athlete monitor his or her heart rate, which gave us all a pretty good idea of the state of their training. You may even be able tell if you are about to get sick by monitoring your heart rate in the first thing when you get up in the morning.

In CM, certain qualities as well as rate of the pulse are measured. Again I will say that a thorough explanation of these qualities would require an entire chapter in this book, and I cannot do it justice here. Instead I recommend the book **"The Web That Has No Weaver"** by Ted J. Kaptchuk to gain a general understanding of CM and pulse diagnosis. Pulse diagnosis is an art form in CM and is a very important diagnostic tool.

More About How Acupuncture Works: A Biomedical Perspective



Still curious for more? This section will tell you a little bit more about what conditions CM can treat and what functions of the body, in biomedical terms, are affected by it.

Acupuncture and CM affect every system in the body, including:

- Circulatory
- Respiratory
- Digestive
- Endocrine
- Immune
- Central nervous system
- Autonomic nervous system

It also affects various functions in the body:

Homeostasis

As I mentioned earlier in the discussion about yin and yang, when we talk about “balance” in CM, we are talking about homeostasis. The body is smart. Homeostasis refers to the ability of the body to adapt to its external environment. It can withstand a great deal of stress and still adapt. **Homeostasis is a very elegant mechanism, and acupuncture/CM supports this.** It works WITH the body instead of against it in order to maintain this balance. **Many modern medications do the opposite: in order to treat a symptom, homeostasis is not supported, but overridden.**

Immunity and the Inflammatory Response

Inflammation is a NECESSARY part of the healing response. (Low level and chronic inflammation, however, is the cause of many degenerative diseases.) These are complex processes, but acupuncture regulates them, which is different from inhibiting them outright. One way acupuncture does this is by activating mast cells, which send signals to the brain to begin a healing response. This process increases blood flow to an area, increases vascular permeability, and initiates a cascade of chemistry to facilitate the repair process. In this sense, we are giving the body a little “nudge” so that effective healing can finally begin.

Microcirculation and Blood Perfusion

Treating both acute and chronic conditions requires blood circulation in order for healing to take place. **Almost everything required for a healing response to take place is carried in the blood.** The blood contains analgesics (painkillers), anti-inflammatories, oxygen, nutrients, hormones, and immune components (white blood cells, antibodies, and other proteins and chemicals mentioned above.) **If blood flow is restricted to a particular area, healing won't occur. No blood flow, no healing.** Oddly, this is often missed in Western medicine.

Metabolic Functions

This is closely related to the concept of [qi \(see page 40\)](#) In this case, we are talking mostly about cellular metabolism.

Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system controls breathing, heartbeat, vasodilation and constriction, digestion, and other functions. **Acupuncture has been shown to regulate these functions to help ease breathing, digestion, regulate body temperature, and more.** For example, acupuncture tends to increase peristalsis, and is one of the reasons it is helpful for constipation and other digestive problems.

Parasympathetic and Sympathetic Nervous Systems

The sympathetic nervous system is also known as the “fight or flight” system. The parasympathetic nervous system is the opposite, and allows the body to focus on other physiological functions other than running away from or fighting a threat: Things like sleeping, digesting, eliminating, and healing. **For this reason, acupuncture works well for patients who are “sympathetic dominant.” It promotes relaxation and healing. The body does not generally heal when it is constantly “on” (fight or flight/performance mode)**

Internal Balance: Acupuncture is successful in treating MANY internal conditions. We don't just treat back pain!



Via the above mechanisms, acupuncture can treat many conditions. The prestigious and internationally respected World Health Organization of the United Nations has identified over 40 medical conditions that are effectively treated with Acupuncture. Listed below are the disorders which scientific research and clinical experience have shown Acupuncture to be effective for:

DERMATOLOGY:

Acne, Eczema, Psoriasis, Painful Scars, Facial Rejuvenation, Acne

DIGESTIVE DISORDERS:

Constipation, Diarrhea, Crohn's Disease, Colitis, Hemorrhoids, Food Poisoning, Abdominal Pain, IBS, Acid Reflux

EAR, NOSE, THROAT AND RESPIRATORY:

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

Allergies, Sinusitis, Vision Problems, Asthma, Cough, Colds/Flu, Emphysema, Meniere's Disease, Sore Throats, Ear Infections, Tinnitus (Ringing in the Ears)

EMOTIONAL:

Stress, Depression, Anxiety, Insomnia, Irritability, Mood Disorders, Stress

GYNECOLOGICAL:

PMS, Menopause, Morning Sickness, Endometriosis, Painful or Irregular Periods, Infertility, Fibrocystic Breast

MISCELLANEOUS:

Smoking Cessation, Addiction Control, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, Lupus.

MUSCULOSKELETAL:

Arthritis, Tendonitis, Bursitis, Back/Neck Pain, Frozen Shoulder, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

NEUROLOGICAL:

Headaches, Sciatica, Numbness, Muscle Spasms, Tremors, Bell's Palsy, Paralysis, Post-Stroke, Parkinson, MS, Alzheimer's, Adult ADHD, OCD

PEDIATRICS:

Ear Infections, Colds, Flu, Sore throat, Cough, ADHD, Autistic Syndrome

UROLOGY:

Bladder Infections, Urinary Incontinence, Prostatitis, Sexual Dysfunction, Bladder Infections

Again, many acupuncturists treat all these conditions, but many others specialize in one or a few areas.

How Acupuncture Relieves Pain: A Western Perspective



“When most people think about acupuncture, they are likely thinking about pain relief.”

Pain physiology is complex and not even completely understood in western medicine. It is multilayered and involves signal processing along neural pathways, hormone and neurotransmitter release, immune responses, and the many roles that the central nervous system plays in the pain response. This explains why some have a higher pain tolerance than others at a given time. Indeed, to make things even more complex, there are many emotional and cultural factors to consider when talking about pain. It is not a simple, straightforward, topic of study.

Pain research is still evolving, and more and more is known each year about the mechanism of pain relief via acupuncture.

There are several theories that explain how this works.

Gate Theory

Acupuncture helps in pain relief by stimulating pain inhibitory nerve fibers. These fibers do not produce pain. As a result, incoming pain messages from the afferent (sensory) nervous system are blocked. Gate theory can explain the effectiveness of acupuncture in short term and acute pain conditions.

Stimulation of alpha brain waves (EEG)

This is the part of the “relaxation response” that occurs during an acupuncture treatment.

Relaxation of smooth muscles

Examples include increased peristalsis in the digestive tract, bronchial dilation, and vasodilation. When under stress, our bodies respond by constriction of these muscles. When they are relaxed, we experience improved digestion and easier breathing, and often less pain.

Trigger Point Theory

When pressed, trigger points feel like "knots" or tight bands in the muscle, and are usually very tender. A trigger point will produce radiating pain when palpated. **These points can be released via acupuncture (dry needling, which many physical therapists and chiropractors use, is also based on this concept)** If you look at a trigger point map, it tends to be very similar to acupuncture meridians and the organization of the fascia networks.

Motor Point Theory

Motor points are points where a nerve interacts with a muscle. (Neuromuscular junction) These points, interestingly, also strongly overlap traditional acupuncture points. **When they are not functioning properly, a muscle will not “fire” properly.** Muscles in a healthy body are relaxed when needed, are responsive and able to function when needed, and “fire” in the proper order.

A good analogy is a symphony or musical performance. If all the instruments play randomly, at the wrong time, and with the wrong intensity, the result is very unpleasant. Good muscular function is like a symphony, and pathologies within the neuromuscular system (yes, the muscles and nervous system work together!) must be dealt with in order for the symphony to happen.

This is one reason why many people often feel good for a few hours or a day after a massage, but return to their original state soon afterwards. **It is important to look a little deeper than simply “massaging” or “rubbing” away muscle pain.** I am not against massage therapy, I love it, but some practitioners are more aware of how the neuromuscular and biomechanical systems work than others.

Neuroplasticity of the nervous system

This means that neural pathways are affected by chronic pain, which leads to actual changes in the central nervous system. (spinal cord and brain) This, in turn, can lead to “learned” perception of pain.

Sensory nerve fiber and chronic pain theory

Chronic pain is difficult to shut off because different types of sensory nerves are involved (C fibers) as opposed to acute pain (A fibers) The brain processes these signals differently. C nerve fibers transmit signals much more slowly than A fibers, and the signal often is not strong enough to initiate the release of powerful pain relieving substances. (for example, endorphins and enkephalins) Via acupuncture, the nervous system is “tricked” into releasing enkephalins in order to shut down the chronic pain response before the perception of pain becomes ingrained into a new neural pathway, which is much more difficult (but possible) to treat.

Pain IS real. Just because something may reside “in your head” does not mean it does not exist! This is due to the phenomenon of neuroplasticity. Acupuncture may have a role in reversing these changes, but as I mentioned earlier, it is still important to first identify why the pain is happening in the first place.

Encourages the release of powerful hormones and neurotransmitters

As stated above, acupuncture releases natural painkillers such as endorphins and enkaphalins. (Natural opioid compounds) **These substances are known to be MUCH more powerful than morphine.**

As discussed above, acupuncture also works on pain via activating the immune system and initiating a healing response. Chemicals such as leukotrienes, prostaglandins, histamines, are contained in mast cells, which are actually broken when a needles is inserted. This micro-trauma creates a SYSTEMIC immune response. This is why it is unnecessary to place a needle directly where pain manifests (for an acute injury, this is not even a good idea) Needles surrounding the area, or in distant sites, can initiate this response.

In summary: acupuncture creates a real healing response, rather than simply arresting a cycle of pain. Damaged tissues can begin to heal.

Tools That Acupuncturists Use To Relieve Pain

Electroacupuncture



This technique usually involves the insertion of needles as in a traditional treatment, but a small electrode is attached to them. A small current and voltage is applied, and feels like a mild, rhythmic tingling. This technique is often used for chronic pain and neurological disorders, spasms, and paralysis. For sports injuries, it promotes the flow of “qi and blood,” relieves pain, and removes blood stasis (a physical blockage, as in scar tissue or adhesions, bruises, or lack of blood flow) Some say it has an advantage over TENS because the needles penetrate the surface of the skin, and the effect is more precise and pinpointed.

There are extensive studies on the efficacy of electroacupuncture, all showing positive results. By the way, that is my foot, and the e-stim DID help with my trail running injury!

Ion pumping cords

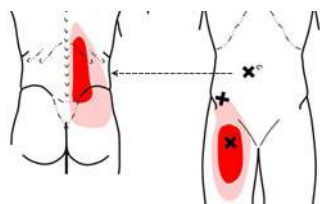
Ion pumping cords help the practitioner to move your body’s energy in a particular direction. The cords are attached directly to the needles. Ion pumping cords do not introduce an outside energy source but instead work with the energy that is already flowing in the body. (Ion flow) This therapy is used much in the same way acupuncture is used (it treats the same conditions) Many report an intensification of the subtle effects of the needles when ion pumping cords are used.

Auricular (ear) acupuncture

The advent of functional MRI has provided an intriguing method to look into the effect that acupuncture has on brain activation. MRI studies have shown that changes take place in the brain during and after auricular acupuncture. There are so many studies being done with this type of acupuncture that it is difficult to sort through them!

Auricular acupuncture is very effective for pain relief, as well as addictions. It has been very successful in helping people to stop smoking. Auricular acupuncture points may be stimulated for a longer period of time by using ear seeds or ear tacks. Ear seeds are small seeds from the Vaccaria plant. These seeds are held in place on the ear with a small piece of adhesive tape. Ear seeds may be left in the ear for a few days or up to two weeks. They are often used as a way to reinforce the acupuncture received in the clinic.

Trigger Point Release



Have you ever had pain in your upper gluteal area or hips? Sometimes this pain is caused by a trigger point in entirely different muscle, such as the psoas or quadratus lumborum muscles in the back. This is also why a problem in the supraspinatus (one of the rotator cuff muscles) refers pain to the deltoid muscle, which is a muscle that is rarely injured. **Pain does not always manifest in the same place where the problem originated. For this reason, I feel that it is important to work with an acupuncturist who is familiar with Trigger Point theory and how the muscles in the body interact.** Trigger point therapy is widely accepted and used in the realm of physical therapy as well as acupuncture.

Correction of muscle imbalances via Trigger Point Release, Motor Point Therapy, and Corrective Exercise

This concept is really about applying concepts in a dynamic environment. The body MOVES. It is not just a static object lying on a table. This is an area that many acupuncturists tend to be weak in. **It requires knowledge of biomechanics to fully “think in 3D” and treat the dynamic neuromuscular system.** A good acupuncturist trained in sports medicine and myofascial pain

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

will watch how you sit, stand, move, walk, and ask questions about how you exercise, your ergonomic environment, and posture when you are not in the office.

An example: I had a bad ankle injury. It caused me to alter the way I walk and run and perform other activities, which in turn, led to problems in my right hip!

This pain is due to what is called compensatory movement patterns. This basically means that if you “favor” one part of your body, or even a small muscle you are unaware of, another muscle or group of muscles will have to compensate. This definitely sets you up for injury and chronic pain in the future.

Manual Therapy

Most CM practitioners incorporate Tui na, (traditional Chinese bodywork) into their work. Some practitioners are also trained in the use of myofascial release, neuromuscular re-education, (Motor Point Therapy) PNF stretching, and therapeutic exercise. I use a lot of manual therapy techniques in my practice.

Herbal Medicine and Liniments



One of the areas that set the CM approach to treatment of myofascial and skeletal pain apart from WM is the use of internal herbal medicine and externally applied liniments. Herbal formulas, taken internally, can help with (as you may guess.. internal!) imbalances that can contribute to pain. **Externally applied CM liniments are often much more effective than ice or most over-the-counter WM topical analgesics, which only mask pain by surface distraction of the nervous system. CM liniments also encourage the “movement of blood” (blood perfusion and breaking up of scar tissue and adhesions)**

This is a fascinating area of study for me. Did you know that there is an “herbal ice” powder (it is made into a paste before application) that can ease the inflammation and swelling of an acute traumatic injury without causing the “stagnation” that ice can? It can be easily carried in a

backpack or first aid kit. In my office, I carry a powerful external paste for traumatic injuries. I have 20 patients and counting that have given it rave reviews!

Soon, I will be writing more about herbal medicine, which is a HUGE topic that deserves special attention.

Cupping

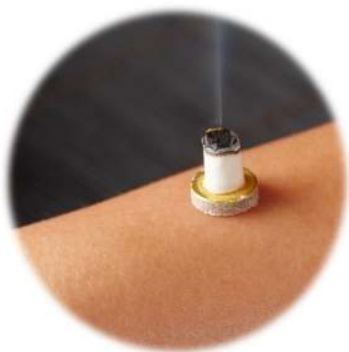


Have you ever seen the red circles on the backs of Olympic athletes? They are not painful. These red circles often result from a technique called Cupping.

Cupping is the term applied to a technique that uses small glass cups or bamboo jars as suction devices that are placed on the skin. The suction and negative pressure provided by cupping can loosen muscles, encourage blood flow, and sedate the nervous system. (It feels like a deep massage) **Cupping is used to relieve back and neck pains, stiff muscles, anxiety, fatigue, migraines, rheumatism, and even cellulite.**

Another related technique, called **Gua sha**, uses a device not unlike what physical therapists use to break up adhesions in muscle. In a sense, this is the goal in CM (breaking up stagnation.) Gua sha also feels pleasant, like a massage, and is commonly used on the back and the neck, as well as to break up stagnation in “tight” areas of the body like calves and feet. Both techniques work very well with either cooling or warming liniments.

Moxibustion



Moxibustion, involves burning an herb called mugwort or “moxa” directly on or above acupuncture points. What you will feel is a diffuse heat. Moxa adds heat and stimulates the points in a similar way to acupuncture. Like acupuncture, moxa is used for wide variety of disorders and is effective with many conditions.

Moxa produces a pleasant sensation of heat and sometimes redness around a particular area, but it is not painful and often has a relaxing effect. It is often used to treat conditions that are “cold” in nature, such as some types of arthritic pain, some types of abdominal pain that are “cold” in nature, adrenal fatigue, and other types of “cold” and “deficient” conditions. I have had a lot of patients respond VERY well to moxa therapy.

Kinesiotaping (Kinesiotape, Rock Tape, KT tape, etc)



You may have seen the bright pink, blue, and black tape on pro athletes. Isn't it just fancy athletic tape? Not at all. This taping method is designed to stretch and contract like human skin. **It reduces pain and inflammation, relaxes overused tired muscles, and supports muscles in movement all day long. It is non-restrictive type of taping which allows for full range of motion.**

How To Get The Most Out Of Acupuncture And Chinese Medicine

In contrast, traditional sport taping is wrapped around a joint strictly for stabilization and support during a sporting event, which can obstruct the flow of bodily fluids. This side effect is undesirable. (in CM we call this qi and blood stagnation) The goal is to CLEAR the injury site to allow blood flow into the area, and proper interstitial (fluid between cells) and lymphatic drainage to occur.

The direction in which the tape is applied can be used to either influence muscle facilitation or inhibition, or in other words, to support your muscles or help them relax. As you can see in the picture of me above, placement of tape can help with posture, scapular stabilization, and shoulder stability. I felt almost instant support, which “taught” my nervous system to maintain good posture and movement patterns. This did indeed take some of the pressure off my shoulder and helped with headache pain.

This taping technique can be used almost anywhere on the body. I have used it for treating foot and ankle pain, shoulder and back pain, and knee pain, all with great results.



“Acupuncture Does More Than Just Relieve Pain. It Stimulates A Healing Response.”

Acupuncture creates “micro traumas” that stimulate the body’s ability to heal injuries to the tissue through nervous, immune and endocrine system activation. As the body heals the micro traumas induced by acupuncture, it also heals any surrounding tissue damage left over from old injuries.

Acupuncture simply initiates the process. It does not take over the actual functions of the body. It is a way of “reminding” or nudging the body into a state of homeostasis, healing, and proper metabolic functioning.

In terms of myofascial pain and dysfunction, if other modalities are added that help reduce scar tissue and adhesions, maintain range of motion and strength, and “re-educate” the

neuromuscular system, there is a very good chance of success in reducing or eliminating pain and even improving health and fitness as we age. (Yes, some damage can be reversed!)

Conclusion

Healing Is Not An Either/Or, Black/White Process

So there you have it! There are many aspects, nuances, and layers to ALL kinds of medicine. There are still a multitude of things to discuss related to this topic, such as how the placebo effect takes place no matter WHAT kind of therapy is applied: ibuprofen, surgery, acupuncture, etc. The placebo effect, even though it may negatively affect the outcome of a study, CAN be a valid PART of the healing process!

We can also talk about an individual's unique response to pain based on neuroplasticity, emotions, and cultural influences. I have only touched the surface of some complex ideas but I hope that I was able to provide some useful information for you for a start!

A Word About The Esoteric

Being the practical person I am, I appreciate “hard” science. But at the same time I am still hesitant to dismiss the more esoteric, “mystical” and yes, “woo-woo” aspects of this medicine. I have studied martial arts and have seen things that might blow the mind of even a skeptic. I have received 5 Element treatments that lifted me from depression that was existential in nature. (My ennui felt like more than just a neurotransmitter imbalance to me.) I got excellent results. Does the exact mechanism matter in these cases? It is a personal choice.

Again, I want to emphasize that I think that both types of medicine, CM and WM, can enhance each other. It is my hope that more discussions can take place, so the gap can be bridged.

References

[Meng X1](#), [Zhang Y](#), [Li A](#), [Xin J](#), [Lao L](#), [Ren K](#), [Berman BM](#), [Tan M](#), [Zhang RX](#).

The effects of opioid receptor antagonists on electroacupuncture-produced anti-allodynia/hyperalgesia in rats with paclitaxel-evoked peripheral neuropathy. 2011.08.004. Epub 2011 Aug 7.

[Romoli M1](#), [Allais G](#), [Airola G](#), [Benedetto C](#), [Mana O](#), [Giacobbe M](#), [Pugliese AM](#), [Battistella G](#), [Fornari E](#).

Ear acupuncture and fMRI: a pilot study for assessing the specificity of auricular points.

[Neurol Sci](#). 2014 May;35 Suppl 1:189-93. doi: 10.1007/s10072-014-1768-7.

John Wetling. About "Acupuncture Qi", and what's it all about? Abstract, The Medical Acupuncture Page

Joseph F. Audette, MA, MDAngela H. Ryan, MD The Role of Pain Management in Acupuncture Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Clinics of North America, 15 (2004) 749-772

Chinese Medicine Demystified, Part IV, Chris Kesser L.ac.

Emma Christiansen, Theories on the Effects of Acupuncture on the Nervous System Serendipity

Keith Spaulding, Andrew Ahn, and Agatha P. Colbert. Medical Acupuncture. April 2013, 25(2): 141-148. doi:10.1089/acu.2012.0947.