

# **ACUPUNCTURE 101**

Acupuncture is a complete and independent system of medicine, constantly evolving and in practice for over two thousand years. It was first introduced to the United States in the early 1970s, when several news articles described a medical technique in China that was used to perform surgery without anesthesia. This technique involved 'extremely thin needles pierced at the skin, at very specific points on the body, somehow producing analgesic effects while the patient remained fully awake'. Thus began the introduction of acupuncture in the US.

Fast forward to 2016 where acupuncture is widely practiced throughout the US with numbers of patients using acupuncture estimated to be in the millions.

For those who are concerned about regulations, the following may be reassuring: the FDA regulates acupuncture needles, requiring that they be sterile, nontoxic, and labeled for single use by qualified/licensed practitioners only. Relatively few complications from the use of acupuncture have been reported, in the light of the millions of people treated each year and the number of acupuncture needles used.

## **So how does it work?**

This is one of the most frequently asked questions, particularly since its first introduction to the US. This question is difficult to answer for a variety of reasons: the struggle with translating traditional Chinese medical texts into English; interpreting the cultural, historical, and philosophical influences on its medicine--uniquely different than what is practiced in the West; and biases and suspicions stemming from the Western medical establishment. Despite this, years of exposure in the US and the vast amount of ongoing research indicates acupuncture's gradual acceptance as a treatment modality for a growing number of conditions--as published by the World Health Organization.

As the desire has grown to understand acupuncture in the US, there have been many attempts to frame this system of medical practice within the understanding of Western medical concepts. This makes it far more accessible to those of us who do not wish to spend the hundreds of hours that graduate students of acupuncture undergo in an attempt to understand the complexity of the historical, cultural and philosophical contexts from which this ancient medicine derived.

To the best of our current knowledge, the following is a distillation of how acupuncture appears to work in the treatment of a wide range of conditions (keep in mind that science is an ever-growing and changing field, with new interpretations and re-evaluations of ideas and theories as the nature of scientific thought):

## **Acupuncture has three primary effects:**

1. It relieves pain.
2. It reduces inflammation.
3. It restores homeostasis.

In broader terms, acupuncture is thought to promote blood flow throughout the body, releasing the body's natural painkillers. One way this is done is by stimulating the **parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)**.

Quick review – the PNS is one of three divisions of the autonomic nervous system. Sometimes called the “rest and digest” system, the PNS conserves energy by slowing the heart rate, increasing intestinal and gland activity, and relaxing sphincter muscles in the gastrointestinal tract.

For those of you who have already experienced acupuncture, this starts to make sense, doesn't it? How many times have you felt relaxed, sleepy, even hungry after an acupuncture treatment? How about feeling very, very relaxed, like you can't remember the last time you felt this relaxed? Or maybe that constipation you've been having lately improves soon after, or you just feel more energy. This is a powerful response in the body with a wide range of potential effects, one that can clearly benefit the healing of the individual on many levels, while being minimally invasive and safe.

In terms of chronic pain, research and understanding is evolving--so keep in mind that our understanding will continue to shift and change as we learn more--but basically, there are several mechanisms at work. One oversimplified explanation is that the bodies' nerve impulses and secretions found in the blood--such as endogenous opioids, immune substances, anti-inflammatories and nutrients--start to decrease the flow of blood to an initially injured area, over time. This protective mechanism is considered “guarding”. In other words, your brain doesn't what all of your energy to be focused on your hurt knee, rather put elsewhere to help you survive and stay alive.

So where does acupuncture come in? It is thought that acupuncture “jumpstarts” that process, or overrides it, by reintroducing and stimulating fresh blood flow to an affected area, thus breaking the cycle of chronic pain.

## **What is Qi?**

If you have had any exposure to acupuncture, it is likely that you have heard of the term 'Qi.'

So, what exactly is Qi? Again, not an easy question to answer. The translation of this term has caused general confusion, misperception, mystification and the possible dismissal and idealization of the entire system of Chinese medicine.

One could say that Qi is energy. This is a great oversimplification unless one understands that we mean energy as Einstein discussed energy in the theory of relativity--that mass and energy have a general equivalence--or another interesting translation from the Greek, meaning “being at work.”

Qi could also be described in terms of functionality, acting similarly to oxygen and having “potential energy”, flowing through the body before turning into energy we can use. This, however, does not capture the essence of how the Chinese used Qi in their traditional medicine.

More traditionally, Qi can be translated to describe 'weather'. In that regard, the Chinese were keen observers of the effects of the environment on the human body. They were aware that natural forces of nature had immediate and ongoing effects on our health.

Another major difference between Chinese and Western medicine is that acupuncture and Chinese medicine focus on **prevention**, by identifying and treating the early stages of disease or imbalance (pre-disease). While Western medicine is gradually embracing the importance of preventative health, the bulk of research, funds, pharmaceuticals, and doctor visits is focused on **disease management**--treating ailments that already exist.

Chinese medicine was developed with a focus on overall observation of each individual patient to determine patterns of imbalance, versus isolating cause and effect of each symptom. Acupuncturists are trained to pick up the subtle cues from imbalance in the body; whether it is change in coloration of the tongue, a hardening of the pulse, a person's demeanor, a shift in sleep patterns or digestive upset. Various observational cues, along with lifestyle behaviors, level of physical or emotional stress, history of trauma, illness, etc, all come into play in reading a pattern of disharmony in every patient. These variables help the acupuncturist to determine the best way to treat each individual and bring their body and mind back into balance, i.e., a general state of well-being and health.

Both modalities have their strengths, and this information is not meant to undermine the immense value and life-saving technology that Western medicine has brought to the modern world. It simply illustrates the overall differences of the two types of medicine and that there are various useful options available for health care management and prevention.

### **Further reading and resources:**

ChrisKresser.com – under Articles, select Acupuncture (6 parts) – Chris Kresser, Lic. Ac., is a globally recognized leader in the fields of ancestral health, Paleo nutrition, and functional and integrative medicine.

The Web That Has No Weaver by Ted Kaptchuck, O.M.D. 2000 – more than an introduction, this beginner text into the world of Chinese medicine explains many concepts in detail, from qi and blood, to meridians and organs and diagnosis

Between Heaven and Earth by Harriet Beinfeld, Lic. Ac. and Ernest Korngold, Lic. Ac. 1992 – This book also gives a thorough introduction to Chinese medicine and treatment, with more emphasis on the theory of the five phases or five elements, with more ready applications to a psychological approach to the medicine.

The Spark in the Machine by Daniel Keown, Lic. Ac. 2014 – “How the Science of Acupuncture Explains the Mysteries of Western Medicine” – an example of the many current attempts at taking the latest understandings in Western medicine and applying them to the theories of Chinese medicine, and how Chinese medicine may explain even more mysteries that Western medicine has yet to describe.