



# CHINESE ACUPUNCTURE

## WHAT IS ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is a healing technique used in traditional Chinese medicine. Very thin needles are used to stimulate specific points in the body. These points lie on energy pathways called "meridians." Acupuncture treatments are designed to improve the flow and balance of energy along these meridians.

Traditional Chinese medicine is at least 2,500 years old. It views the human body as a system of energy flows. When these flows are balanced, the body is healthy. Practitioners take their patients' pulses and examine their tongue to diagnose energy imbalances. In Chinese medicine, pulses can be taken at three positions on each wrist, and at three depths at each position.

Illness is not defined by symptoms or the name of a disease like "HIV infection." Instead, a practitioner of Chinese medicine will talk about energy imbalances. The language can sound very strange, like "yin deficiency" or "liver heat rising." The Chinese words yin and yang refer to opposing energies that should be in balance, and Qi (pronounced "chee") can be roughly translated as energy or life force.

In traditional Chinese medicine, there are many ways to improve the balance of the body's energy flows. The most common techniques used in the western world are exercise techniques such as Qigong or Tai Chi, or acupuncture or herbalism. Fact Sheet 704 has more information on Chinese herbalism.

Many practitioners of Chinese medicine specialize in either acupuncture or herbalism. Very few use both methods.

## WHY DO PEOPLE WITH HIV USE ACUPUNCTURE?

Because acupuncture deals with energy balance, there are not specific acupuncture points used to treat HIV.

Instead, your acupuncturist will use your pulses and will probably look at your tongue to find out how your energy flows are out of balance.

Acupuncture does not cure HIV infection. Many people, however, believe that it has helped them improve their overall energy, or deal with the side effects of antiretroviral medications (ARVs). Some people have used acupuncture to reduce the upset stomach or diarrhea caused by their medications. Other people find that it helps ease the pain caused by neuropathy (See Fact Sheet 555 for more information on neuropathy).

## HOW IS ACUPUNCTURE USED?

Based on your energy imbalances, your acupuncturist will select acupuncture points to stimulate. You will lie on a table, either on your stomach or on your back. Needles will be inserted at the selected points. You may feel a little pain, tingling or numbness as the needles are inserted. The needles are left in place for up to 30 or 45 minutes, depending on what the acupuncture is intended to accomplish. During that time, many people fall asleep.

You might receive additional treatments during acupuncture to increase the flow of energy:

- The needles might be stimulated with a very mild electric current (*electroacupuncture*)
- Moxa is soft material prepared from dried mugwort, an herb. Moxa may be put on the top end of acupuncture needles or (rarely) right on the skin. Moxa is burned to provide penetrating heat. This is called *moxibustion*.
- Round glass cups can be used to create suction over specific points (*cupping*). The suction stimulates the flow of energy. If the cups are left on for a long time they can leave a red mark.

Some practitioners use small beads or tiny needles held in place with adhesive to keep pressure on an acupuncture point for a few days.

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND SIDE EFFECTS?

Some people feel slight pain, numbness or tingling when acupuncture needles are inserted. In rare cases, people will feel dizzy or nauseated during acupuncture. There may be a drop of blood when a needle is removed. Acupuncture has far fewer side effects than most western medicines.

You should not go for an acupuncture treatment if you have had any alcoholic beverage within an hour, or if you are using any recreational drugs.

Be sure your acupuncturist knows if you are pregnant. Some acupuncture points should not be stimulated during pregnancy.

## HOW DO WE KNOW IT WORKS?

Research on acupuncture shows that it is effective in treating some kinds of pain and nausea. This led the National Institutes of Health in 1997 to issue a statement supporting the value of acupuncture for certain conditions. The World Health Organization lists over 40 conditions that may be helped by acupuncture.

A recent study on acupuncture to relieve the pain of neuropathy did not show any benefits. However, the study design has been criticized for using the same acupuncture points for everyone in the study, and for using fake acupuncture points for comparison. Many people with neuropathy believe that acupuncture has helped them.

Reviewed May 13, 2007