

UNDERSTANDING ACUPUNCTURE AS A NATURAL HEALTH ALTERNATIVE

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Acupuncture is a 2000-year-old Chinese treatment in which needles are inserted into specific points on the body. Over the years, acupuncture has evolved to a point where it is more commonly being incorporated into alternative health care practices with growing popularity. More people are turning to acupuncture to treat their health concerns and for good reason; new scientific evidence and research continues to emerge

supporting the true health benefits of this treatment for many common, non life-threatening ailments. The purpose of this article is to explain the theory of how acupuncture works, common conditions it is used for, and to address other frequently asked questions.

For years researchers have attempted to establish physical pathways that might correspond to the ancient Chinese meridians without much success. Instead, contemporary science has turned to our current understanding of how the body functions to explain the mechanisms of how acupuncture works. From this modern perspective, diseases and injuries are resolved by a complex set of responses. Acupuncture primarily exerts its influence through the nervous system, and the act of inserting an acupuncture needle into the body is thought to trigger these complex set of responses. Insertion of the needle will stimulate certain nerve fibers locally and at the level of the spinal cord to release natural pain-blocking substances. A signal is also sent to the mid-brain where additional pain-blocking substances are released, suppressing the transmission of the pain impulse. An acupuncture needle may also influence the pituitary gland and in turn the adrenal glands to produce natural substances that produce system-wide pain relief. The net result of these three areas being stimulated is a blocking of the pain signal locally, a general pain-relieving effect throughout the body, an anti-inflammatory effect, and a general sense of well-being. In addition, other complex mechanisms that influence blood flow and the lymphatic system are thought to play a vital role in the healing and restorative powers of acupuncture.

Most research related to acupuncture has been in the area of pain control and management. The World Health Organization (WHO) lists approximately four-dozen different conditions that can legitimately be treated by acupuncture. It is the experience of the author that most successful applications of acupuncture are for pain problems, particularly acute and chronic muscle and joint pain. These include but are not limited to acute sprains and strains, muscle pain, arthritic pain, shoulder, neck, and low back pain, tennis elbow, carpal tunnel syndrome, plantar fasciitis, achilles tendonitis, migraine and tension headaches. Acupuncture may also be of help as an adjunct treatment for digestive problems such as irritable bowel, constipation and diarrhea, respiratory problems such as sinusitis and bronchitis, and uncomplicated psycho-emotional problems such as stress, anxiety and insomnia. Acupuncture has shown minimal benefit and value in the treatment of more complicated conditions that are categorized as chronic inflammatory and immune disorders such as ulcerative colitis, asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, and collagen-vascular diseases.

As with any health intervention, there is always a potential for side effects and adverse reactions. The good news is that acupuncture performed by an experienced and knowledgeable practitioner is relatively safe and infrequently yields very few minor side effects. These may include but are not limited to a slight discoloration at the acupuncture site that is temporary and not dangerous, minor bleeding, nausea, short-term fatigue or drowsiness, or a short-term increase in pain before relief sets in. An experienced and knowledgeable acupuncturist also aims to avoid treatment of certain points during pregnancy, over wounded or infectious areas, to individuals who are hemophiliacs, and to individuals who have needle phobia.

Individuals curious about acupuncture often wonder if the procedure hurts or how it feels. The needles used for acupuncture are much smaller than the standard hypodermic needle, are solid, not hollow, and have a finely tapered point as opposed to a beveled cutting-edge point. The sensations felt during needle insertion range from feeling nothing at all, to mild tingling, to slight numbness/achiness, to electrical pulsations distant to the site of insertion. All these sensations usually subside once the needles are removed. Following treatment it is common for the patient to feel a tremendous sense of relaxation. It is common practice nowadays for practitioners to use sterile disposable needles that are discarded following treatment. Acupuncture treatments are as individual as the patients and their responses to acupuncture. In some instances, conditions can be resolved with just one treatment. More often, the cumulative effects of acupuncture requires a treatment plan of 8 to 12 visits, though after 6 to 8 treatments the extent of the response can be approximated.

Acupuncture has an exciting and emerging role in the future of alternative medicine. It has been able to withstand the test of time due to its natural healing and restorative powers. New research should continue to emerge which will validate this natural health intervention and expand our knowledge about how acupuncture can effectively be utilized.

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