

A Primer on Medical Acupuncture

Have you ever had an uncontrollable urge to be pierced by a dozen needles? This is the image most people get when someone mentions the word "acupuncture". It comes as no surprise that most view this technique with suspicion, even downright horror. The fact is, however, that this relatively painless ancient Chinese technique has helped relieve the symptoms of millions of people. Properly used, it can help in the management of many medical conditions including chronic pain and fatigue.

How does needle puncture work?

Practitioners of Chinese traditional medicine believe in energy flows. This energy, called Qi, circulates around the body using pathways called meridians. Meridians run very close to the surface of the skin in certain areas and can be accessed by needles. Much like plumbing, these pipes can get blocked or go the wrong way, causing health problems. The insertion of needles at these points is aimed to help loosen blocks and normalize flow.

It sounds like a made-up explanation with no basis in reality, but there are numerous scientific studies which support the effects of acupuncture. Although the exact scientific basis is still unknown, recent theories seem to suggest involvement of complicated neurochemical effects in the brain, nerve to spinal cord impulse modulation, and microscopic connective tissue changes.

What risks and side effects are of concern?

The use of things not completely understood for the treatment of medical conditions is nothing new. Penicillin and aspirin were used for decades solely on the basis of their beneficial effects, without doctors knowing exactly how they worked. Results are what are truly important. However, it is equally important is to ensure that the technique is used safely.

Like other strategies used in treating health conditions, acupuncture may have some side effects. Medications have side effects and allergic reactions, surgeries have risk of infection and complications. For needle puncture, there is a risk of injury, rare infections, minor bleeding, small bruises, and some dizziness.

You can minimize the possible side effects by choosing a licensed acupuncturist. Most countries either have government licensing in place or have professional organizations with very strict rules and regulations.

How do treatments go?

An acupuncturist will do an initial evaluation of your medical history and your body's current state. Multiple pressure points are palpated, and a regimen of treatment is formulated. Most courses involve a series of 10 to 20 treatment sessions, each lasting 30 to 90 minutes. Needles will be carefully placed at the required points and kept in place for some time. Most patients report a feeling of mild sensation at the site of the puncture, but no real pain.

Right after each acupuncture session, you will feel a bit tired and may need to rest. Some people feel an increase in their energy levels. The response to acupuncture is very individual. In some cases there is immediate relief of symptoms. For some patients, the beneficial effects may only be noticed after undergoing a few sessions. Do not be alarmed and keep your acupuncturist updated on what you are feeling to ensure everything is going as expected.

You need never fear the thought of needles ever again. Acupuncture is a beneficial treatment with a long history of effectiveness. It is used to complement current medical therapy and should not replace currently existing medications or treatments.

The safe application of this once exclusively Chinese therapy can now be experienced by chronic disease sufferers worldwide.