



## Acupuncture for Healing

*The ancient art is a pain remedy for millions*

BY SUE DEPASQUALE

### Before Embarking on Treatment ...

- Be sure to inform all of your health care providers that you are using, or considering using, acupuncture. Ask their opinion about the likelihood of success for your condition or disease.
- Be an informed consumer. Find out what scientific studies have been done on the effectiveness of acupuncture for your health condition.
- Choose a practitioner with care, making sure he or she is licensed. And check in with your insurer to see whether the services will be covered.

SOURCE: National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine  
<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/acupuncture/>

Once viewed as a “fringe” therapy with questionable benefits, acupuncture has moved squarely into the mainstream in most industrialized nations, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Currently, more than 50 percent of the population in these countries report having used some form of complementary medicine during their lives as an alternative or in addition to traditional medicine, according to the World Health Organization. In the United States alone, an estimated 8.2 million people have tried acupuncture at some point, and more than 22,500 people are now licensed to practice the ancient healing art.

Though people turn to acupuncture for a wide variety of ailments—from asthma and hypertension to depression and the debilitating nausea caused by chemotherapy—it’s most commonly sought out for the relief of pain, and often after more conventional treatments have failed.

“By the time many people come to us, they have been through multiple layers of the health care system,” says licensed acupuncturist David Paton, who has been practicing in Maryland for 15 years. “Because we’re often not the first choice, we end up seeing someone for a chronic condition,” he adds. Among the most common ailments sending patients for relief: chronic headaches, arthritis and lower back pain.

Acupuncture has its origins in China more than 2,000 years ago, and today remains fully integrated into that nation’s health care system. The term describes a family of procedures that stimulate points on the body through a variety of techniques—most commonly through hair-thin, metallic needles.

The placement of these needles is crucial and is based on the philosophy underlying traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). It holds that the body exists in a delicate balance of two inseparable and opposing forces—the *yin* (cold, slow or passive principle) and the *yang* (hot, excited, active principle).

Ill health points to the body being thrown out of balance, according to TCM, indicating blockage of the flow of *chi* (vital energy; pronounced *chee*) along the body’s 12 main “meridians” and eight secondary meridians. The acupuncturist’s task: to bring the body back into balance by stimulating some combination of the 2,000-plus acupuncture points connecting these meridians.

While it is difficult to generalize about a “typical” course of treatment, says Paton, patients often begin on a weekly basis, while some traditions call for multiple sessions for several weeks. On average, an individual session lasts 45 to 60 minutes. Administered correctly, the sterilized acupuncture needles cause no or minimal pain. While some people report feeling a sense of relaxation during the treatment, others experience a “tingling” sensation and an overall feeling of being energized.

"Within six to eight treatments, you should be able to experience changes," Paton says. Many, though not all, people report reduction in their acute pain, and improvement in other areas of wellness—better sleep, less fatigue, he says. Chronic conditions take longer to remedy (after all, they've had years to develop) and often require a long-term treatment plan.

"While people often first come to see an acupuncturist for pain, the effects of acupuncture often reduce the impact of tension in your life," notes Paton, who is dean of students at Tai Sophia Institute, a graduate school for the healing arts, the first accredited acupuncture program in the United States, established in 1981 and based in Columbia, Md.

Constant stress—brought on by punishing deadlines, financial worries and work/family conflicts—can interfere with the body's ability to repair itself at the cellular level, setting off a cascade of ever worsening health problems. The holistic approach to good health (treatment of the whole person as opposed to just the specific ailment) that Tai Sophia Institute and other acupuncture programs advocate calls for taking steps to reduce that daily stress and for using acupuncture to "harmonize the flow of *chi*" so that the body's "natural healing tendencies are accelerated or maximized," explains Paton.

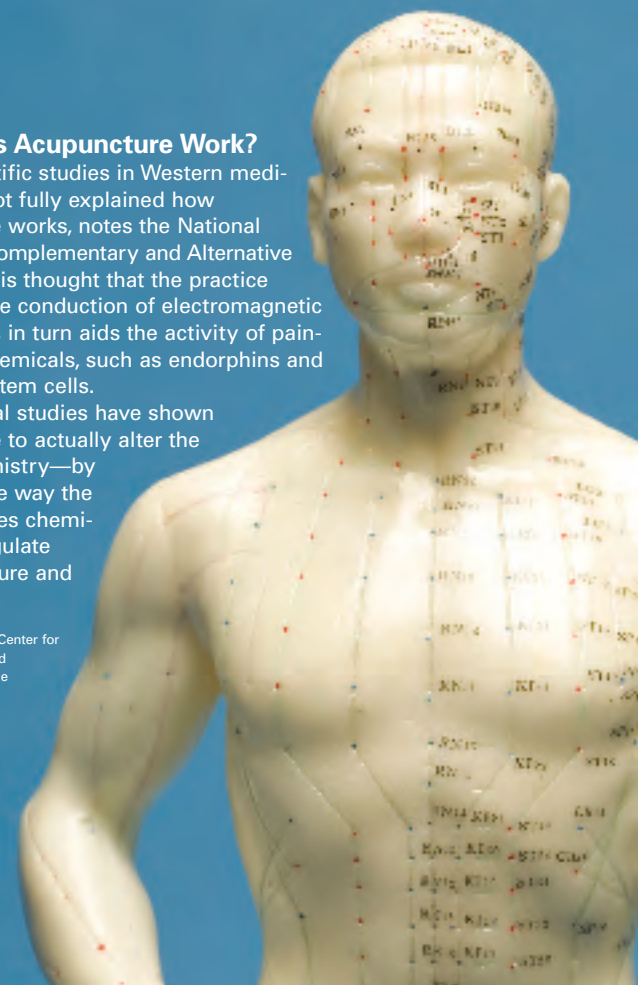
"Eventually," he adds, "acupuncture and related holistic wellness practices may become part of the maintenance [plan] of one's health, much like brushing your teeth." ■

## How Does Acupuncture Work?

While scientific studies in Western medicine have not fully explained how acupuncture works, notes the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, it is thought that the practice promotes the conduction of electromagnetic signals. This in turn aids the activity of pain-killing biochemicals, such as endorphins and immune system cells.

Additional studies have shown acupuncture to actually alter the brain's chemistry—by changing the way the body releases chemicals that regulate blood pressure and blood flow.

SOURCE: National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine



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