

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a part of Oriental Medicine which has principles and philosophies which are different from modern Western Medicine. It was first described over 2000 years ago in the Chinese text, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*. This text stated that many diseases penetrated the body through the skin and progressed inward through various tissues. The ancient teachings maintained that by inserting a needle to a depth that corresponded to the extent of disease penetration, the ailment would be allowed to exit the body, and health would be restored.

Over the years acupuncture philosophy evolved to include the concepts of *meridians*, which were thought to be “channels” that promoted the flow of *vital energy* (also known as *Qi*) through the body. Disruptions of this flow, rather than disease penetration, became accepted as the source of disease. Acupuncture aimed to cure the illness by restoring the natural flow of vital energy through stimulation of certain spots (called *acupoints*) along the meridians in the body through the use of fine needles.

During the modern era, advances in the study of anatomy failed to show any physical pathways that corresponded to meridians or any fluids that resembled Qi. Accordingly, acupuncture philosophy was revised, where it is now believed that this mode of therapy enhances the body’s own healing powers through stimulation of inherent biochemical pathways by using needles that are inserted at acupoints. Today, other forms of stimulation have been incorporated, including electricity, lasers, and magnets to affect the nervous system, which is the main organ that acupuncture targets. According to some studies, this mode of therapy increases the amount of certain neurotransmitters – which are signaling molecules between nerve cells – and enkephalins/endorphins – which are the body’s own pain relieving chemicals.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, a key element for successful acupuncture is achieving a specific sensory experience by the person being treated. This sensation varies among different persons, and it may be felt as numbness, tingling, or warmth, but usually not pain. Although it is recognized that placing acupuncture needles in certain parts of the body may produce a slightly painful response, this is not a desired response to acupuncture treatments – since the needles used for acupuncture are very thin (much smaller than the standard hypodermic needle). In fact, most patients describe the treatments as relaxing, and often leave in less discomfort than when they walked in. Sometimes, however, the initial effects are too subtle and several treatments may be necessary before any improvements become apparent.

Acupuncture is generally thought to be safe and without significant risk of complications, the most significant of which is infection at the site of needle entry. To reduce this risk, however, practitioners should ensure that the needles used during the treatment are either pre-sterilized in an autoclave (similar to surgical instruments) or disposable.

The Washington Post reported in 1994 that an estimated 6% of Americans have visited an acupuncturist for a variety of symptoms such as chronic pain, fatigue, gastrointestinal problems, and arthritis. This was followed in 1995 by recognition of acupuncture and classification of its needles as medical instruments by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Later, in 1997, the National Institutes of Health released a statement, mentioning that there is sufficient evidence of acupuncture's value to expand its use into conventional medicine as an adjunct treatment in a comprehensive management program for conditions such as chronic pain.

Similar to other health care fields, the Medical Board of California provides licensing for acupuncturists, who are only allowed to practice after successfully completing four years of training at an approved school of Oriental Medicine, and passing exams given by the California Acupuncture Committee. In order to ensure that proper treatment will be rendered, look for a copy of the acupuncture license, which should be displayed in the practitioner's office.

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