

“DOCTOR WHAT’S THIS ACUPUNCTURE ALL ABOUT?”

A Brief Explanation for Patients from the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture

ACUPUNCTURE: WHAT IS IT?

Acupuncture is a method of encouraging the body to promote natural healing and to improve natural functioning. This is done by inserting needles and applying heat or electrical stimulation at very precise acupuncture points.

HOW DOES IT ACUPUNCTURE WORK?

The classic Chinese explanation is that channels of energy run in regular patterns through the body and over its surface. These energy channels, called meridians, are like rivers flowing through the body to irrigate and nourish the tissues. An obstruction in the movement of these energy rivers is like a dam that backs up the flow in one part of the body and restricts it in others.

The meridians can be influenced by needling the acupuncture points; the acupuncture needles unblock the obstructions at the dams, and reestablish the regular flow through the meridians. Acupuncture treatments can therefore help the body’s internal organs to correct imbalances in their digestion, absorption, and energy production activities, and in the circulation of their energy through the meridians.

The modern scientific explanation is that needling the acupuncture points stimulates the nervous system to release chemicals in the muscles, spinal cord, and brain. These chemicals will either change the experience of pain, or they will trigger the release of other chemicals and hormones which influence the body’s own internal regulating system.

The improved energy and biochemical balance produced by acupuncture results in stimulating the body’s natural healing abilities, and in promoting physical and emotional well being.

WHAT IS MEDICAL ACUPUNCTURE? IS IT DIFFERENT FROM ORDINARY ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is a very old medical art, and there are many approaches to learning and practicing it. Medical acupuncture is the term used to describe acupuncture performed by a doctor trained and licensed in Western medicine who has also had thorough training in acupuncture as a specialty practice. Such a doctor can use one or the other approach, or a combination of both as the need arises, to treat an illness.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF MEDICAL ACUPUNCTURE?

Medical acupuncture is a system, which can influence three areas of health care:

- Promotion of health and well-being,
- Prevention of illness,
- Treatment of various medical conditions.

While acupuncture is often associated with pain control, in the hands of a well-trained practitioner it has much broader applications. Acupuncture can be effective as the only treatment used, or as the only treatment used, or as the support or adjunct to other medical treatment form in many medical and surgical disorders.

The World Health Organization recognizes the use of acupuncture in the treatment of a wide range of medical problems, including:

- Digestive disorders: gastric and hyper-acidity, spastic colon, constipation, diarrhea.
- Respiratory disorders: sinusitis, sore throat, bronchitis, asthma, and recurrent chest infections.
- Neurological and muscular disorders: headaches, facial tics, neck pain, rib neuritis, frozen shoulder, tennis elbow, various forms of tendonitis, low back pain, sciatica, osteoarthritis.
- Urinary, menstrual, and reproductive problems.

Acupuncture is particularly useful in resolving physical problems related to tension and stress and emotional conditions.

HOW MANY TREATMENTS WILL I NEED?

The number of treatments needed differs from person to person. For complex or long-standing conditions, one or two treatments per week for several months may be recommended. For acute problems, usually fewer visits are required, and for health maintenance, four sessions a year may be all that is necessary.

ARE THERE ANY SIDE EFFECTS TO THE TREATMENT?

Usually not. As energy is redirected in the body, internal chemicals and hormones are stimulated and healing begin to take place. Occasionally the original symptoms worsen for a few days, or other general changes in appetite, sleep, bowel or urination pattern, or emotional state may be triggered. These should not cause concern, as they are simply indications that the acupuncture is starting to work.

It is quite common with the first one or two treatments to have a sensation of deep relaxation or even mild disorientation immediately following the treatment. These pass within a short time, and never require anything more than a bit of rest to overcome.

WHAT ARE THE NEEDLES LIKE? DO THEY HURT?

People experience acupuncture needling differently. Most patients feel only minimal pain as the needles are inserted; some feel no pain at all. Once the needles are in place, there is no pain felt.

Acupuncture needles are very thin and solid and are made from stainless steel. The point is smooth (not hollow with cutting edges like a hypodermic needle) and insertion through the skin is not as painful as injections or blood sampling. The risk of bruising and skin irritation is less than when using hollow needle.

Because your doctor carefully sterilized the needles using the same techniques as for surgical instruments, or uses disposable needles, there is no risk of infection from the treatments.

DOES ACUPUNCTURE REALLY WORK?

Yes. In the past 2,000 years, more people have been successfully treated with acupuncture than with all other health modalities combined. Today, acupuncture is practiced in Asia, the now disbanded Soviet Union, and in Europe. It is now being used more and more in America by patients and physicians.

Acupuncture treatments can be given at the same time as other techniques are being used, such as conventional Western medicine, osteopathic or chiropractic adjustments, and homeopathic or naturopathic prescriptions. It is important that your physician-acupuncturist know everything that you are doing, so he/she can help you get the most benefits from all your treatments.

DO I HAVE TO BELIEVE IN ACUPUNCTURE FOR IT TO WORK?

No. Acupuncture is used successfully on cats, dogs, horses and other animals. These animal patients do not understand or believe in the process that helps them get better. A positive attitude toward wellness may reinforce the effects of the treatment received, just as a negative attitude may hinder the effects of acupuncture or any other treatment. A neutral attitude ("I don't know if I can really believe in this") will not block treatment results.

ARE THERE ANY "DO'S OR DON'TS" FOR ME ON THE DAY OF TREATMENT?

Yes. To enhance the value of a treatment, the following guidelines are important:

- Do not eat an unusually large meal immediately before or after your treatment
- Do not over-exercise, engage in sexual activity, or consume alcoholic beverages within six hours before or after treatment
- Plan your activities so that after the treatments you can get some rest, or at least not have to be working at top performance.

This is especially important for the first few visits.

- Continue to take any prescription medicines as directed by your regular doctor. Substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) especially in the week prior to treatment, will seriously interfere with the effectiveness of the acupuncture treatments.
- Remember to keep good mental or written notes of what your response is to the treatment. This is important for your doctor to know so that the follow-up treatments can be designed to best help you and your problem.

IS ACUPUNCTURE COVERED BY HEALTH INSURANCE?

Some insurance companies currently cover acupuncture costs; other companies do not yet recognize the value of acupuncture. Each health policy must be reviewed to determine acupuncture benefits.

The AAMA is working to inform insurance companies and the public in order to standardize payment practices and accessibility to this type of treatment. You can help by insisting that your insurance company offer you reimbursement for medically indicated acupuncture treatments before you accept their policy.