

Acupuncture

Acupuncture has been part of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for thousands of years. It involves inserting fine needles into specific points on the skin or applying various other techniques to the acupuncture points to restore balance and encourage the body to heal itself.

Evidence of effectiveness of acupuncture

Scientific trials around the world have found that when acupuncture is performed by a skilled practitioner, it is a safe and useful treatment for many different disorders.

The British National Health Service carried out a systematic review of the evidence for the use of acupuncture to treat or manage a range of disorders. They found that there was evidence that acupuncture is effective to treat dental pain, jaw pain and to control nausea after operations and chemotherapy treatment.

For many conditions where acupuncture can be used, the evidence has not been systematically reviewed, or the current scientific evidence to prove that it is effective is not yet established.

Clinical guidelines published in many different countries have found that acupuncture is moderately helpful in a wide range of conditions, particularly those which involve pain.

Laws and regulations for acupuncture practice

Apart from processes being implemented in Victoria, there is currently no direct government legislation overseeing the traditional Chinese medicine industry. However, there are indirect laws, including:

- drugs and poisoning scheduling – to restrict access to herbs and herbal substances that are known to be toxic
- skin penetration regulations – which emphasise the necessity of strict hygiene practices, such as using pre-sterilised, single-use and disposable acupuncture needles
- Therapeutic Goods Administration – this government organisation has legislation that requires Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) for goods that claim to be sterile, which includes acupuncture needles. In order to be legally sold, acupuncture needles have to be included on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods.

Choosing an acupuncturist

Some healthcare practitioners offer acupuncture after completing a short course. However, the philosophy of acupuncture is complex, so you should only use a qualified acupuncturist. Since 2000, all Victorian acupuncturists and Chinese herbalists have to be registered. You don't need a referral from your doctor to see an acupuncturist.

Risks of acupuncture

In the hands of an unskilled practitioner, acupuncture may lead to a number of problems including:

- Allergic reactions – herbs are sometimes burnt over the skin to create specific points of heat near acupuncture points. Herbs are as powerful as pharmaceutical medications and need to be treated with the same respect and caution
- Infection – if the needle is unsterile, bacteria can cause local infection. There is also a risk of contracting hepatitis, HIV or any other bloodborne disease if the needles are reused

- Injury to the skin – clumsy insertion, or entry of a needle into a blood vessel, can cause bleeding, bruising and pain.
- Unexpected side effects – such as an increase in pain, depression, convulsions or insomnia. Acupuncture can produce significant changes within the nervous system and it is vital that the correct points are stimulated in the right way.

How acupuncture is performed

Pre-sterilised disposable needles should be used. Depending on the location of the treatment, you will either sit or lie down. Properly done, acupuncture is painless because the needles are very fine (around 0.2 mm wide). When the needles are inserted, you may feel mild tingling around the site, warmth or heaviness, or even nothing at all.

An acupuncturist may use other techniques including:

- cupping – suction designed to bring blood to the acupuncture point
- Chinese herbs – either mixed by the acupuncturist or in pre-prepared tablet or granulated form
- laser – used instead of the needles to activate acupuncture points
- TCM remedial massage – techniques applied to specific acupuncture points or meridians
- moxibustion – burning herbs held over or applied to acupuncture points.

After a session of acupuncture, you will normally feel relaxed and refreshed, but specific responses depend on each person. For instance, some people feel energised, while others feel sleepy. Occasionally, the symptoms get a little worse before they improve.

The number of treatments you need depends on your condition. In most cases, people experience a reduction in symptoms within a few sessions. The idea of acupuncture is to restore the natural balance of energy inside your body. Once the balance is restored, the body can take care of itself and no further treatments are necessary.

Where to get help

- Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA) Tel. 1300 725 334
- Federation of Chinese Medicine Associations (FCMA) Tel. 1300 367 136
- Your doctor
- Chinese medicine doctor

Things to remember

- Acupuncture is part of traditional Chinese medicine and consists of inserting fine needles into specific points on the skin.
- Performed by a skilled practitioner, acupuncture can be a safe and effective treatment for a range of disorders.
- The treatment can be effective even if you don't believe in the underlying philosophy.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DH - RHP&R - Office of the Chief Health Officer

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