

HEALTH

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TCM: Acupuncture

Unlike herbal therapy which adds substances to the body, acupuncture stimulates the body's own power to heal itself.

In TCM theory, the flow of *chi* in the meridian system concentrates or "injects" some points of the skin's surface. Acupuncturists work on these to regulate the body and return it to a state of health. Studies show the meridian system and its acupoints might correspond to a number of body tissues. Autopsy studies show 324 acupoints are within the range of 5mm to the nearest nervous pathways. In them, 323 points are located close to the distribution of cranial or spinal nerves. Researchers identified 309 acupoints to see how they are related to the distribution of blood vessels. They found 24 points are located precisely on the major arteries, and 262 points next to them.

Studies have found that needling sensations such as tightness or heaviness might be due to muscular responses related to the local interaction of the nerves. Moreover, many needling sensations might be due to specific tissues being stimulated: nerve fibre stimulation may cause numbness; blood vessel stimulation could give rise to pain; and stimulation of the muscles, tendons and periosteum (the dense fibrous membrane covering the surface of bones, serving as an attachment for muscles and tendons) lead to soreness and feelings of distension.

Preclinical studies have recorded the effects of acupuncture; however, they are still not able to fully explain how it works using modern science. Acupuncture seems to stimulate the body's signalling systems to promote physical and emotional well-being. Specialists say it can work in three major ways: as pain relief, as a regulator of the body and as an enhancer of immune defence.

Acupuncture can ease respiratory movements too. In the digestive system, it regulates gastrointestinal tract movements and secretions and helps under-functioning intestines, as in constipation or diarrhoea. Likewise, acupuncture modulates the work of the kidneys as well as bladder emptying. It can also help improve sexual functioning. In pregnant women, the selection of some acupoints can induce relaxation during pregnancy. In men, acupuncture can treat premature ejaculation or impotence.

Needling helps shorten recovery time in patients after anaesthesia. For problems of the peripheral nervous system such as facial palsy, trigeminal neuralgia (facial pain) and sciatica, acupuncture helps reduce inflammation, stop pain and promote regeneration of new nerve fibres. Acupuncture improves immune functioning by increasing the amount of white blood cells and their action in killing bacteria.

Thus, acupuncture can be used for most conditions - not just for bad backs and sore muscles.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.