

Treating Headaches with Traditional Chinese Medicine

If you suffer from headaches, you're not alone. According to Stats Canada, seven percent of Canadians experience migraines¹, and many others are affected by tension headaches, sinus headaches and cluster headaches. The good news is that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can offer effective relief.

② **Assessing your headache**

According to TCM, health is a harmonious balance of mind and body with their surroundings. In contrast, illness is an imbalance. In the case of headaches, TCM defines many different types, but essentially they all boil down to a single root cause: the lack of free flow of Blood and Qi.

For example, your headache could be caused by a deficiency condition, in which there is not enough Qi and Blood to nourish the head. In contrast, a sinus congestion headache might be diagnosed as too much Phlegm and Dampness obstructing the flow of Qi and Blood.

At your first visit to a TCM practitioner, you'll be asked about the location of your headache, the nature of the pain, and what makes it better or worse. Your practitioner will also examine your tongue and complexion and take your pulse to determine whether you're suffering from an excess or a deficiency condition, or a combination of both.

② **Treating your headache**

Treatments for headaches follow a similar strategy to treatments for other pain conditions. Acupuncture can be very effective. In addition, herbs and dietary advice may be used, especially as part of a prevention strategy.

As with other pain conditions, you will need roughly one weekly treatment for every month you've been living with your headaches. You can expect that your pain level will decrease after a single treatment. It will likely return before your second treatment, but probably not to the original level. After the second treatment, you can expect a greater reduction in pain and a longer lasting effect, and so on for each subsequent treatment.

Keep in mind that not all pain is treated the same way. TCM always looks at the whole person, including diet and lifestyle. So it's not just a migraine headache that's being treated, it's a migraine created by the particular factors contributing to your body's state of imbalance. This means that the same kind of headache may be treated quite differently in different people, and individual responses to treatment can also vary widely.



Getting results

Several studies have documented the effectiveness of both herbs and acupuncture in treating headaches.

For example, a study of Chinese herbs and migraine headaches used a classical formula to treat 57 patients. After 20-30 days of herbal treatment, 42% of patients were clinically cured and another 46% showed measurable improvements².

Other studies have focussed on the use of acupuncture to treat migraines. One study of 150 patients revealed 51% were clinically cured and 47% showed measurable improvements following acupuncture³. In another study, 81% of patients with chronic headaches reported improvements at the end of ten acupuncture sessions⁴. Most recently, an Italian study found that women who chose acupuncture to prevent migraines rather than flunarizine, a calcium channel blocker, experienced fewer initial symptoms, fewer attacks and fewer side effects from the treatment⁵.



Preventing headaches

Because stress and diet usually play a big role, TCM can help to prevent recurring headaches through lifestyle counselling. For example, if your headache is caused by excess damp, avoiding dairy products and sugar can be helpful. For headaches caused by Qi and Blood deficiency, you should consume nourishing hot food and avoid raw fruits and fruit juices. Your practitioner can offer advice on modifying your diet, developing a gentle exercise routine, and reducing stress.

1 Statistics Canada. Chronic Pain. Health Reports, 1996. 7(4):50.

2 Yang Quanci et al. 57 cases treated with modified chuanxiong chatiao san. J. Anhui TCM Col., 1999. 18(1).

3 Wei Fengbo et al. Clinical and experimental study of acupuncture treating 150 cases of migraine. Chin J Acup, 1998. 8(5):27.

4 Spoerel W.E., Varkey, M. and Leung, C.Y. Acupuncture in chronic pain. Am J Chin Med, 1976. 4(3):267-79.

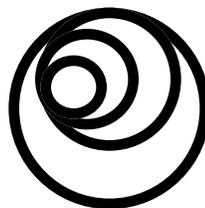
5 Allais, G. et al. Headache, 2002. 42:855-861.

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Disclaimer

This factsheet is not intended to treat, diagnose or prescribe. The information provided is not to be considered a substitute for consultation with a qualified health care practitioner.

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