



Treating Musculo-skeletal Pain with Traditional Chinese Medicine

Pain conditions bring many people to a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) clinic: back pain, knee pain, tennis elbow, the list goes on. Unfortunately, most of us can expect to suffer from pain at some point in our lives. Twelve percent of Canadians currently suffer from pain or discomfort that prevents at least a few of their activities, according to Stats Canada¹, and low back pain is estimated to affect 60 to 80% of the population at least once in their life². The good news is that TCM can offer effective treatments.

② **Assessing your pain**

Your first session will begin with an assessment of your pain; how long you've had it, what caused it, and what makes it better or worse. Your practitioner may also perform a range of motion test to determine how your pain is affecting your joint mobility.

② **Treating your pain**

According to TCM, "where there is blockage, there is pain". Most pain conditions are the result of some kind of blockage in the flow of Qi or Blood, so the treatment strategy is to open up the channels.

Acupuncture is very effective at "getting things unstuck". It has two effects: first of all, it creates short-term pain relief by stimulating the release of serotonin and natural opiates and by creating electrical impulses that inhibit pain. Secondly, it encourages long-term healing and repair of the affected tissues by reducing inflammation, increasing blood circulation, and relaxing chronically tense muscles.

Herbs can also be used to open the channels, especially if the blockage is caused by a deficiency condition. They are also useful in nourishing tendons and ligaments. Keep in mind that not all pain is treated the same way. TCM always looks at the whole person, including their diet and lifestyle. So it's not just a sore back that's being treated, it's your sore back. This means that the same kind of pain condition may be treated quite differently in different people.

The length of your course of treatments will depend largely on how long you've had your pain condition. As a very rough guide, you can expect one weekly treatment for every month you've had your condition.

② **Getting results**

You can expect that your pain level will decrease, even after a single treatment. It will likely return before your second treatment, but

not always 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.

A 1994 British study documented this analgesic effect in a group of patients with tennis elbow. After one treatment, 80% of acupuncture patients reported at least a 50% decrease in pain, compared to only 25% of patients in the control group³. Similarly, a recent meta-analysis of studies on acupuncture and low back pain found that patients were 2.3 times more likely to report improvement than control groups⁴.

At the same time, needling will heal the affected tissues. Over a course of treatments, acupuncture will resolve the underlying condition in addition to treating the pain.

Preventing injuries

Many pain conditions are the result of sport injuries. You can reduce the likelihood of becoming injured by stretching regularly ... every day or every other day. When you stretch, think "gentle" and think "sustained". Stretch only to the point where you feel it, then hold for a slow count of 12. Don't forget to relax and breathe as you do this! Stretching can become a rewarding daily ritual. Don't be surprised to find it addictive.

Even if you are suffering from pain, gentle exercise is good for most . Yoga, tai chi, walking, swimming or cycling can all be helpful ... consult with your practitioner to find out what will work best for you.

I am indebted to my instructor Dr. Kai Chen M.M., Ph.D. (Beijing) for summarizing the Chinese research used in this factsheet.

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1. Statistics Canada. Chronic Pain. Health Reports, 1996. 7(4): 50.
 2. Skovron, M.L. Epidemiology of low pack pain. Bailliere's Clinical Rheumatology, 1992. 6:559-73.
 3. Molsberger, A. and Hille, E. The analgesic effect of acupuncture in chronic tennis elbow pain. British Journal of Rheumatology, 1994. 33(12):1162-5.
 4. Ernst, E. and White, A.R. Acupuncture for back pain: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. Arch Intern Med, 1998. 158:2235-2241.
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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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