

What are Acupuncture and Chinese Herbal Medicine?

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM for short) is a very old system of medicine that makes use of many different types of treatments to address illnesses. In TCM, mind, body and your surroundings all play an important role in your health. Health is seen as a harmonious balance of these three and illness as an imbalance in one or more of these areas. Another factsheet in this series describes in detail how TCM would assess your health. In this factsheet, two commonly used treatments are described: acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.



Acupuncture

Acupuncture involves inserting very thin needles into specific points on the body. By carefully choosing points to match your condition, a practitioner can balance the flow of Qi and Blood in your body's meridians and return the body to a state of equilibrium.

Acupuncture needles are typically inserted below the skin layer and into the muscle layer of the body. The actual depth will vary from person to person and from one location on the body to another. From a bio-medical perspective, the acupuncture needles can have local effects by stimulating receptors found in a muscle. For example, needles are able to encourage overly tense muscle fibers to lengthen and relax. As well, the needles can have effects that influence the whole nervous system. This has been demonstrated in research on pain relief that shows acupuncture can stimulate the release of pain-relieving peptides and neurotransmitters by the brain.

There are acupuncture points located all over the body. Your practitioner will tell you what areas of your body will be treated. The diameter and length of the needle will vary depending on your condition and where the point is located.

Any discomfort felt during treatment is usually very mild. You may experience numbness, pressure or a mild electrical sensation as nerves in the area are stimulated. Generally, treatment is relaxing and people have even been known to fall asleep during an acupuncture! Once inserted, the needles are usually left in place for between 15 - 20 minutes before being removed and safely disposed of. Always insist that your practitioner uses single-use, sterilized needles.

Occasionally people experience momentary dizziness or drowsiness after treatment. These sensations are temporary. Because some people feel drowsy after treatment, it's a good idea to schedule your acupuncture session on a day where you don't have too many demands.

Treatments are usually scheduled on a weekly basis. In acute conditions, more frequent treatments are sometimes recommended as they can bring about faster results. Unfortunately, TCM cannot provide miracle cures and a series of treatments is usually required to fully address most conditions.



Chinese Herbal Medicine

Chinese herbs are well known for being effective but also for tasting very bitter. China's modern Pharmacopoeias have over 5000 different entries, but most practitioners will use a range of 200 – 300 different herbs. Commonly several single herbs are combined into a formula. that are modified as your condition changes. If you're being treated with herbs, you'll most likely receive a week's worth of herbs at a time. Each week your practitioner will adjust the formula to match your changing condition.

For example, there is a famous formula used to prevent cold and flu's called "Jade Windscreen Powder." It is made up of three herbs and is designed to boost your body's defenses. If you're suffering from serious fatigue and poor appetite, tonic herbs like ginseng would be added to boost the your Qi. On the other hand, if you suffer from allergies, additional herbs such as Flos Magnoliae or Fructus Xanthii would be added to the formula. In this way, a single formula can be adapted in many ways.

Herbs are usually boiled in a non-metallic pot for 20-45 minutes to make a strong tea. Some practitioners use extract granuels, created by freexe-drying a traditionally brewed tea. These provide effective herbal prescriptions that are more convenient to use and not as bitter tasting. You might also receive your herbs in the form of pills or powders.

When you receive a herbal prescription, carefully follow your practitioner's instructions on how to take the herbs and ask questions if any part is unclear. Improper brewing of herbs can reduce the formula's effectiveness.



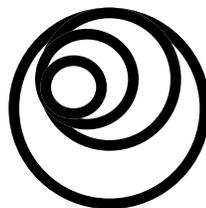
Putting it all together

Your practitioner will work with you to develop a treatment plan that is right for you. Often dietary and lifestyle advice are included. These recommendations are important to control your condition and to help your body to heal itself. Other treatment options include Tui Na massage – a type of massage that incorporates acupressure as well as broad strokes, Qi Gong – special exercises that make use of breathing and gentle movments to regulate the flow of Qi, and remdial exercises designed to help you to gain flexibility and strengthen specific muscle groups.

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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