

WHAT IS ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is a medical technique a little over 2000 years old whereby very fine (e.g. 0.18mm width) solid, sterile needles are placed in the skin at various areas. These fine needles stimulate the nervous system, resetting its functioning. What this contributes to modern medicine is that wide-ranging self-healing effects can be induced in the body by stimulating the peripheral nervous system below the skin. With acupuncture some degree of health improvement or enhancement occurs in 70% to 80% of people who receive the appropriate number of treatments.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

There may be a slight pinch or mild soreness as the needle passes through the skin. Often however there is little or no feeling due to the extreme fineness of the needles used. Various indications that the acupuncture area is activated may occur locally to the needle or at some distance, even at sites not normally thought to be connected to the nerve being stimulated. Some examples are: feelings of warmth, heaviness, numbness, or a brief twinge, ache or electric sensation. If soreness occurs it is brief in duration. There is little comparison between acupuncture and the intense discomfort often associated with some medical procedures. A small number of people can be especially sensitive to this procedure so in their case finer needles and fewer acupoints with less stimulation are used.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS AMENABLE TO ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT

Acupuncture is endorsed by the *World Health Organization* and the *National Institutes of Health* for the treatment of numerous disorders. Acupuncture needles are classified by the FDA as medical devices. A partial list of medical conditions found to respond effectively to acupuncture by the *American Academy of Medical Acupuncture* is as follows: acute and chronic pain, allergies, sinusitis, insomnia, period pain, TMJ, bursitis, headache, arthritis, plantar fasciitis, frozen shoulder, back and neck pain, nausea, irritable bowel, neuralgia, anxiety, numbness and tingling, and spasms.

HOW MANY TREATMENTS ARE NEEDED?

Acupuncture has an accumulative effect, so generally a minimum of 4 to 6 treatments are needed to initiate and begin to stabilize change in symptoms. A further 6 to 8 treatments may be needed in many cases, depending on how long a problem has been occurring and the overall health of the patient. For young healthy individuals fewer treatments may be needed, and for those with multiple health issues improvement may take longer.

Treatment frequency usually involves one or two visits a week. For the initial 6 treatments try to leave no longer than a week between sessions. Some chronic conditions may need booster treatments every few weeks or months. Approximately 50% of people are average responders to acupuncture, 30% are high responders and 20% non-responders. It may take 2 or 3 treatments to determine your particular response rate and pattern, thereby enabling the acupuncturist to tell you what to expect with further treatment.

Acupuncture may resolve pain and symptoms fully or reduce them to manageable levels. Depending on the condition being treated and the overall health of the patient results may be enduring or last several weeks to many months.

For those with serious conditions requiring medication acupuncture may improve the effectiveness of certain drugs so that with a physician's over-site dosage can be reduced, thus minimizing side effects.

An experienced acupuncturist can indicate the expected effectiveness of treatment tailored for individual conditions and patients.

Acupuncture treatment usually lasts 10 to 20 minutes, during which time the patient rests on a comfortable treatment table. Many people experience deep relaxation with this technique.

HOW DOES ACUPUNCTURE WORK?

Acupuncture works via the nervous system, positively affecting nerve centers in the spine and, as shown by fMRI studies, structures deep within the brain. Complex neuro-hormonal pathways are influenced having pain reducing and other diverse effects. Through research and clinical investigation experts in the field find that acupuncture stimulates the following self-healing effects in the body:

- Reduces inflammation
- Relaxes tight muscles that may be putting pressure on joints and nerves
- May desensitize over-reactive nerves in the spinal cord that result in chronic pain
- May re-set Long-Term Potentiation in the central nervous system thereby releasing pain as a type of learned pattern
- Balances the nervous system – reducing over-reactivity
- May alter the way the brain receives pain signals from the body
- Helps with the emotional component and perception of chronic pain
- Reduces spasming in muscles and the gastrointestinal tract
- Reduces allergic reaction
- Affects natural chemicals in the brain calming the mind and body
- May re-set blocked descending pain-inhibiting signals from the brain
- Improves circulation via muscle relaxation
- Improves sleep and energy and helps encourage the overall balance and wellness of homeostasis

Though contemporary scientific research does not support existence of the traditional meridians or most traditional theory of acupuncture it nevertheless reveals the surprising sophistication of physiological responses that acupuncture stimulus induces. This then confirms the practical efficacy of acupuncture and opens the way for scientifically based theories for how it works.

There are decades of highly effective use and development of what could be termed “post-traditional” acupuncture. See C. Chan Gunn, Anthony Campbell, Yun Tao Ma, Felix Mann to name a few practitioner/researchers who have developed contemporary scientific approaches to acupuncture. In my practice I increasingly draw from the work of these authors as well as years of experience using TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine).