

Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine in MS

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Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as practised today developed from a body of knowledge of an ancient healing system that first appeared in China in written form around 100 B.C.

This system describes human physiology and psychology in a similar manner to modern medicine. However, it also depicts the body and its function in terms of life energy called qi (pronounced 'chee') and the pathways along which the qi moves within the body, called meridians. TCM holds that the fundamental causes of illness are the blockage of meridians and imbalance of qi.

The TCM practitioner will first identify the meridians involved in the illness process and the nature of qi imbalance, based on the symptoms, then develop and implement a treatment plan, which often includes acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.

Qi

Qi is an essential concept in Chinese medicine. When used with the name of an organ or system, qi means the life energy that supports all the functions of that organ. For example, the heart qi keeps blood circulating throughout the body, and the blood qi is the nourishment the circulatory system provides to the body. Qi is also used to describe emotions, such as anger qi, or joyful qi. "Symptoms" of qi imbalances

include deficiency, stagnation, rebellion, and collapse. According to TCM, MS symptoms such as visual disturbance, dizziness, muscle twitches, and migrating pain are often due to liver blood deficiency. Memory loss, insomnia, lower back pain, incontinence and erectile dysfunction are believed to be caused by kidney qi and essence deficiency. Muscle weakness and atrophy, fatigue, indigestion, lack of mental clarity and bruising easily are thought to indicate spleen qi deficiency.

The nature of qi is also categorised as *Yin or Yang*. Yin qualities include cold, stillness, and physiologic processes involved in nutritional support, while Yang qualities include heat, moving and physiologic processes involved in function. In the normal state of health, Yin and Yang are in balance with each other.

A TCM practitioner would interpret MS symptoms such as restlessness and involuntary movement of muscles and extremities as signs of Yang qi, which may be the result of too much Yang qi or too little Yin qi in the system. For the TCM practitioner, it is critical to differentiate these two conditions to tailor the most appropriate treatment.

We can see parallels to Yin and Yang in modern medicine, such as excitatory and inhibitory neurotransmitters in the neurologic system and

suppressing and stimulating cytokines in the immune system. Restoring the balance is the goal of acupuncture and Chinese medicine.

Diagnosis and treatment

Each person must be thoroughly evaluated by a well-trained and experienced TCM practitioner, who applies the comprehensive theoretical foundations and techniques of ancient Chinese medicine in the diagnostic and therapeutic process. According to Chinese medicine, people who have the same MS subtype may have a different qi imbalance and therefore require individualised treatment.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a tool to balance Yin and Yang, open meridian channels that are blocked, remove

qi stagnation, redirect rebellious qi and facilitate qi circulations to produce an effective therapy.

In treatment, the acupuncturist inserts sterile, disposable, fine needles on the surface of the skin at the point (often called acupoint) that is connected with particular meridians. Some people may feel a minimal sensation when the needle is inserted, while others experience a brief but sharp pain. After inserting the needle, the acupuncturist needs to touch and manipulate the qi, which will generate sensations such as dull aching, pressure, tingling and numbness that may also radiate along the meridians and may sometimes linger hours after the treatment. Side effects associated with acupuncture are extremely low. Minor adverse reactions include bruising at acupuncture sites, fatigue, needle pain,



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and bleeding. Serious complications are rarely seen and are often caused by negligent or poorly trained acupuncturists. Using a clean needle technique, avoiding vessels when inserting the needle and performing the treatment with the person in a relaxed position can reduce side effects.

Chinese herbal medicine

Chinese herbal remedies are an essential component of the healing process in TCM. Unlike many synthetic medications or vitamins, these remedies do not have specific biochemical targets from an isolated compound. While a herb may have many chemical agents, they are chosen based on the energy output of the whole. The treatments are selected based on the practitioner's evaluation of qi energy, yin and yang balance and other components of the diagnostic portion of the visit.

Chinese herbs should be used by an experienced practitioner and not indiscriminately because, according to TCM, the body's life system changes over time. Prolonged use should be evaluated at regular intervals to ensure that the treatment is continuing to promote harmony and balance. The qualities of herbal remedies vary with manufacturers and people should always consult a practitioner with experience in using these products.

Research and clinical studies

A review of the available studies on acupuncture commissioned by the National Institutes of Health in 1997 concluded there was "clear evidence" that acupuncture was beneficial for relieving pain and certain other symptoms, and stated that the evidence was as strong as it is "for many accepted Western medical therapies". The panel found that acupuncture was "remarkably safe with fewer side effects than

Editor's note: There have been no well conducted studies to evaluate the safety or effectiveness of Chinese herbs in MS. Some Chinese herbs do contain compounds with immune-stimulating activity. Thus, on a theoretical basis, these herbs could worsen MS or antagonise the effects of disease-modifying medications.



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many well-established therapies". It is important to keep in mind that these were not studies on MS.

There are few studies on acupuncture and MS specifically. These have shown mild, short-term benefits. One suggested there might be improvement in MS-related bladder difficulties and others have shown conflicting results on spasticity. A large-scale survey reported that around two-thirds of MS patients benefited from acupuncture, with improvements in pain, bowel and bladder problems, spasticity, weakness, coordination, tingling, and sleep disorders. However, subjects also reported increased fatigue, spasticity and dizziness.

There are limited well-designed studies on acupuncture or herbal medicine in treatment of MS. Due to the deficiency of modern research methodology and inconsistent and inadequate treatment intervention, the conclusion from clinical studies needs to be interpreted with caution.