



Acupuncture: ancient myth or modern science?



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Most people in the United States have heard about acupuncture over the past decade, but few understand what it is, how it works, and when to use it for their health.

Acupuncture is one type of treatment associated with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The ancient Chinese began using this treatment approximately 2,500 years ago, and both the East and West continue to use acupuncture in conjunction with modern medical interventions to this day.

Tobias Donaker, acupuncturist at St. John's Center for Living, answers a few questions about what acupuncture is, what it isn't and how it can help alleviate pain and treat some common health issues.

How does acupuncture work?

Acupuncture consists of inserting tiny needles into precise points on the body. These locations are not random. Chinese doctors, over many generations, found and documented areas on the body that specifically affect different medical conditions and types of injury.

When the body is relaxed, digestion improves, nausea subsides, muscle tightness relaxes, menstrual cycles become more regular, sleep improves and mood picks up. In addition, pain, inflammation, blood pressure, heart rhythm and heart rate lower.

Many people think acupuncture is more myth than medicine. Is this true?

No. Scientific research has found acupuncture manages symptoms of illness and injury in two ways. It creates changes at the site where needles are inserted into the body, and causes changes to happen in the brain. This happens because the needles "trick" the brain into behaving differently than it currently does.

How does that happen?

When an area is needled locally, certain changes happen. More blood, oxygen, antihistamines and white blood cells arrive in the area. These all work to increase healing, reduce inflammation, block pain, stop muscle spasms and tension and clean up damaged cells. The brain is also stimulated by the local needles, because around 99 percent of acupuncture points have nerve endings present. These nerves send signals to the brain.

The brain is uncertain how to read these signals though, so it reacts by releasing natural painkillers, resetting the nervous system to rest and digest and reducing stress hormones throughout the body. This causes overall pain to go down, calms and relaxes the body and allows the body to function as it normally would when not stressed.

What are some common health issues acupuncture can help treat?

Although acupuncture works for many conditions, it should be used in conjunction with treatment plans established by a doctor. The World Health Organization has compiled a list of conditions treated by acupuncture, which includes pain conditions, nausea, anxiety disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and infertility.

What if a person is afraid of needles?

Acupuncture needles don't usually cause pain.

Is acupuncture covered by health insurance?

Sometimes. Insurance coverage is limited for most policies in Illinois, but several do cover it. For example, Hospital Sisters Health System (HSBS) covers it, and some State insurance plans do as well. However, patients need to check their specific policies to know for certain. For all patients, a physician's referral is necessary for billing.

Is there anything else you want people to know about acupuncture?

Acupuncture is an excellent treatment for many conditions, but like all medicine, has its limits. It is best used as a first line of treatment for mild and moderate symptoms. Using acupuncture in this way may reduce the need for medications and surgery, while improving a patient's quality of life and overall wellness.

