

## **Acupuncture Health Benefits as an Alternative to Pain Medication**

### **7 Reasons Why Anyone Should Try Acupuncture for Pain**

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Despite the fact that acupuncture is a complete system of healing, most of our patients come to our clinic with the chief complaint of pain. Here we are going to explain how we view pain in Chinese medicine and list 7 reasons to see an acupuncturist if you have any acute or chronic pain condition.

#### **What is pain?**

Pain is the way for our bodies to communicate with us that something is not right. Pain is often associated with inflammation, the body's response to injury. The inflammation is our gift from nature because in the absence of inflammation the wounds and injuries would never heal. In Western medicine, it is known that inflammation increases the circulation of plasma and leukocytes (infection fighting white blood cells) to the injured tissue. Similarly, in Chinese medicine's view, the body increases the circulation of blood and Qi (or vital energy, pronounced "chee") to the area of injury. To understand this process, imagine that there is a construction crew on the road fixing a pothole. The drivers are annoyed because of the bottleneck created by the construction crew. However, the congestion is necessary because if not fixed the pothole will get bigger, and eventually the road will deteriorate preventing anyone from driving on it. This repair process is similar to the healing process in the human body. The congestion caused the increased circulation of blood and Qi to the injured tissue causes pain. In Chinese medicine we have a saying "when there is free flow (of Qi), there is no pain, when there is pain, there is no free flow."

#### **Reason #1: Healing versus fixing**

A Western medical doctor looks at the patient's body in terms of its structure and function, finds the malfunction and then fixes it. An acupuncturist also looks at the body structure and function, finds the malfunction but does not fix it. The main difference is that Chinese medicine helps the body heal itself. Acupuncture can treat the root of the problem by improving the flow of energy and blood. This speeds up and optimizes the body's natural ability to heal itself. Qi is not just a form of energy; it serves as a line of communication between different body parts, organs, brain, etc. connected by channels or meridians. If the patient shows up in our clinic with any chronic pain, we pose the question, "Why did the body fail to heal itself?" We know that somehow these lines of communication had been broken. As acupuncturists we find out how and where the flow of Qi had been broken and help to restore these connections.

#### **Reason #2: Acupuncture can block the pain**

Some pain is extremely severe such as terminal cancer pain or acute pain from fracture. Acupuncture can block or control such pain. In a way, the analgesic effect of acupuncture is similar to the effect of pharmaceutical pain killers.

In China, surgeries are performed routinely with only acupuncture for anesthesia. This is how acupuncture became known in the West. When President Nixon visited China in 1971, a New York Times reporter James Reston who traveled with the president had to undergo an emergency appendectomy. He had received acupuncture for pain relief recovering from surgery and then observed how surgeries were performed with only acupuncture for anesthesia. Later on his articles sensationalized acupuncture and opened the doors for Chinese medicine in the USA. You can read his full article titled "Now, Let Me Tell You About My Appendectomy in Peking..." here <http://acupuncture.com/testimonials/restonexp.htm>. Currently acupuncture is the best researched and most effective alternative treatment for providing analgesia for surgery.

### **Reason #3: No risk of re-injury**

For example, you injured your knee and took a pain-killer to block the pain. It is now easy for you to start using this knee and go beyond what the body would normally allow. Meanwhile, the knee is still vulnerable to re-injury. With acupuncture treatment, the circulation of blood and Qi (energy and communication) is increased for healing. The patient can then begin to use his or her body safely. Acupuncture relieves the pain and at the same time allows the patient to be aware and sensible about not over-using the healing body part.

### **Reason #4: Acupuncture is scientifically proven to be effective**

In case you have a scientific mindset, you may want to look into the latest acupuncture research. The largest, longest and most rigorous randomized study on the effect of acupuncture was performed in 2004 by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) and the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), both components of the NIH. The study focused on osteoarthritis of the knee and enrolled 570 patients. The findings of this controlled phase III clinical trial were published in the December 21, 2004, issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. To quote the results, "By week 8, participants receiving acupuncture were showing a significant increase in function and by week 14 a significant decrease in pain, compared with the sham and control groups. These results, shown by declining scores on the WOMAC index, held through week 26. Overall, those who received acupuncture had a 40 percent decrease in pain and a nearly 40 percent improvement in function compared to baseline assessments." This study is a great example of modern research showing that the ancient methods can be scientifically proven to be effective. There are many more studies currently ongoing and recently completed and we encourage our patients to keep up with the latest acupuncture research done at NIH through this website <http://nccam.nih.gov>.

### **Reason #5: Acupuncture is very safe**

Some patients resort to surgery to deal with certain pain conditions. However, surgeries are risky, and the surgeons can never guarantee 100% success rate. Recovery from surgery can be long and complicated. If the surgery fails, it cannot be

undone. Acupuncture, on the other hand, is extremely safe and can be stopped at any moment without any irreversible consequences.

Most over the counter and prescription medications cause unwanted side effects such as gastro-intestinal upset or constipation and place the burden on the liver and kidneys that need to work extra hard to metabolize these drugs.

Recent research shows that acupuncture triggers the body's own mechanism of manufacturing and releasing its own pain relieving chemicals. These chemicals are endorphins and dopamines, opioid-like compounds that produce the feeling of well-being and happiness and reduce pain. The body knows the exact dose that you need at the right time. It is like a perfect pharmacy that can produce any medication needed for healing without any unwanted side effects!

### **Reason #6: Acupressure can be done at home to supplement acupuncture**

In China the patient in pain usually undergoes a course of acupuncture daily or even several times per day for a course of ten days or two weeks. This does not work the same way in the West because of time and financial constraints. What we offer our patients instead is to use acupressure. We show how and train our patients or their relatives to perform acupressure treatments. Home acupressure takes just a few minutes and greatly accelerates the healing process.

### **Reason #7: Acupuncture treatments are tailored to each patient and include lifestyle coaching**

In the West, doctors are extremely busy and often spend just a few minutes with a patient. How long does your doctor spend with you and how much does she know about you? Sometimes patients need to see many different specialists for his or her pain condition. For example, one of our patients suffered in an accident that resulted in tremendous pain at multiple sites. She has seen an orthopedic surgeon for her leg and hip pain, a gastroenterologist for her intestinal pain and a psychologist to deal with the emotional pain before trying acupuncture.

Chinese medicine looks at you as a whole - body, mind and spirit. An acupuncturist partners with you to learn how your whole body heals and what conditions and factors aggravate the condition or make the healing more optimal. We coach our patients to avoid or increase certain foods, to apply heat or cold, suggest changes in daily routine or certain exercises.

There are no silver bullets or quick fixes in Chinese medicine because the body needs to go through the healing journey to return to balance. Some patients experience tremendous relief even after a single treatment; however, most patients will require several weekly visits before major improvements are noticeable. Our job is to be your partner on this journey and ensure that you achieve your highest healing potential safely and effectively.

### **Finding an acupuncturist**

You might wonder about how to find an acupuncturist. You will be surprised how many people you already know may have already tried acupuncture. So first ask your friends and relatives and anybody you trust about their experiences. If your friend can't say enough good things about acupuncture, get that acupuncturist's

contact information. Of course, you have to make sure that an acupuncturist is licensed to practice in your state. Acupuncture treatments are sometimes covered by health insurance, so it is always a good idea to check with your insurance provider to see if the acupuncturist is in the network of providers. If not, ask your insurance provider how much will you reimbursed for acupuncture for seeing someone out of network. Check if your acupuncturist is available for a short consultation (either in person or on the phone) before your first visit to discuss your condition. You can then decide if this acupuncturist is a good match for you. To find acupuncturists in your neighborhood, you can use online services such as [www.acufinder.com](http://www.acufinder.com). Acupuncture sessions typically last one hour and cost between \$60 and \$100 for a routine visit (the first visit is longer and typically costs more).