

## What is Acupuncture?

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Originating in China more than 3,500 years ago, acupuncture is one of the oldest, most commonly used systems of healing in the world. Along with Chinese herbal medicine, tui na (therapeutic massage), qi gong, tai chi, and nutritional therapy, acupuncture is part of Traditional Chinese Medicine, a sophisticated approach to healing for the prevention and treatment of illness.

Acupuncture originally caught the attention of the American public over 30 years ago when New York Times reporter James Reston wrote about how doctors in China used needles to ease his pain after surgery. Since then the awareness and popularity of acupuncture has grown immensely in the United States. According to the 2002 National Health Interview Survey, an estimated 2.1 million U.S. adults had used acupuncture in the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, there are over 2,000 acupuncture points with specific actions and indications on the body that are connected by 20 meridians or pathways. Qi, pronounced “chi” or energy is thought to circulate throughout these meridians providing nourishment to internal organs and tissues. The flow of qi or energy is believed to be disrupted by various factors such as poor diet, stress, illness, and injury. When qi is disrupted symptoms such as pain, fatigue, poor sleep, and irritability may manifest. If left untreated, chronic degenerative illnesses may result. Acupuncture is the stimulation of acupuncture points with the use of solid, hair-thin needles to promote and balance the flow of qi and restore health.

Several theories have been presented as to exactly how acupuncture works. One theory, called the gate theory suggests that acupuncture may stimulate the nervous system to block pain impulses from reaching the spinal cord or brain at various “gates” to these areas. Another theory based on several studies suggests that acupuncture stimulates the body to produce enkephalins, endorphins, and opioids, natural pain-killing substances. Other studies suggest that acupuncture can affect parts of the central nervous system related to sensation and involuntary body functions, such as immune reactions and processes that regulate blood pressure, blood flow, and body temperature by changing the release of neurotransmitters and neurohormones in the body. 2, 3

Based on a review of numerous clinical trials, the World Health Organization has cited that over 100 conditions can be treated with acupuncture, including neuromusculoskeletal conditions (such as arthritis, sprains, neck/shoulder/back pain, fibromyalgia, and sciatica); addictions to nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs; cardiovascular disorders (such as hypertension, hypotension, and stroke); gastrointestinal conditions (such as gastritis, gall stones, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting); gynecological and obstetrical conditions (menstrual cramps, premenstrual syndrome, female infertility, labor pain, and morning sickness); respiratory disorders (such as allergic rhinitis, asthma, emphysema, and bronchitis); and psychological and emotional disorders (such as depression, schizophrenia, and anxiety).<sup>4</sup>

According to a Consensus Statement released by the National Institute of Health in 1997, acupuncture can be used effectively by itself or in combination with other therapies to treat addiction, headaches, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain, osteoarthritis, lower back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome and asthma. Acupuncture is often used integratively with Naturopathic Medicine as both medical systems aim to remove the obstacles to wellness, stimulate the body’s own healing ability, and restore health and balance.

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4. Acupuncture: Review and analysis of reports on controlled clinical trials, WHO Geneva, 2002