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WHAT IS ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is a system of healing which has been practiced in China and other Eastern countries for thousands of years. Although often described as a means of pain relief, it is in fact used to treat people with a wide range of illnesses. Its focus is on improving the overall well being of the patient. This is done by inserting needles and sometimes applying through them heat or electrical stimulation.

Originating in China more than 2500 years ago, acupuncture began to become better known in the United States in 1971. It was then that *New York Times* reporter James Reston, stricken with appendicitis while in Beijing, was treated successfully with acupuncture for post-surgical pain. In a front page *Times* story, Reston wrote, "I've seen the past, and it works!"

HOW WIDELY IS ACUPUNCTURE USED?

In the past two decades, acupuncture has grown in popularity in the United States. The report from a Consensus Development Conference on Acupuncture held at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1997 stated that acupuncture is being "widely" practiced – by thousands of physicians, acupuncturists, and other practitioners. According to the 2002 National Health Interview Survey - the largest and most comprehensive survey of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use by American adults to date - an estimated 8.2 million U.S. adults had ever used acupuncture, and an estimated 2.1 million U.S. adults had used acupuncture in the previous year.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

According to traditional Chinese philosophy, our health is dependent on the body's motivating energy – known as "Qi" – moving in a smooth and balanced way through a series of meridians (channels) beneath the skin.

Qi consists of equal and opposite qualities – "Yin" and "Yang" – and when these become unbalanced, illness may result. By inserting fine needles into the channels of energy, it can stimulate the body's own healing response and help restore its natural balance.

The modern scientific explanation is that needling acupuncture points stimulates the nervous system to release chemicals in the muscles, spinal cord, and the brain. These chemicals will either change the experience of pain, or they will trigger the release of other chemicals and hormones which influence the body's own internal regulating system.

The principal aim of acupuncture in treating the whole person is to recover the equilibrium between the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the individual.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF MEDICAL ACUPUNCTURE?

Medical acupuncture is a system which can influence three areas of health care:

- Promotion of health and well-being
- Prevention of illness
- Treatment of various medical conditions

Alone or as an adjunct to western medicine, acupuncture provides effective treatment for many common complaints, and may provide additional relief for problems that do not respond completely to western medical treatment. Some people may use acupuncture as a preventive measure to strengthen their constitution or because they feel unwell, without being "ill" in the western sense.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the use of acupuncture for the treatment of a wide range of medical problems, including (but not limited to):

- Gastrointestinal disorders: peptic ulcer, chronic diarrhea, constipation, anorexia and gastritis, and irritable bowel syndrome
- Respiratory disorders: sinusitis, asthma, allergies, and bronchitis
- Neurological and muscular disorders: headaches, facial tics, neck pain, frozen shoulder, tennis elbow, various forms of tendonitis, low back pain, sciatica, and osteoarthritis
- Addictions: alcohol, nicotine, and drugs of abuse
- Supportive therapy: nausea and vomiting, pain control, boosting immune response, and lymphedema after surgery

Acupuncture is particularly useful in resolving physical problems related to tension, stress and emotional conditions.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT?

As with any therapy, the response to acupuncture can differ from one person to another.

While many acute conditions may be alleviated rapidly, other conditions that have arisen overtime, may take longer.

As in any form of healing, the patient's attitude, diet, determination and life style may affect the outcome of treatment.

IS ACUPUNCTURE SAFE?

In general, acupuncture is considered a safe treatment. Occasionally the original symptoms may worsen for a few days. Other general changes in appetite, sleep, emotional state, bowel or urination pattern may be triggered. These should not cause concern, as they usually indicate that acupuncture is starting to work. Initially, a sensation of deep relaxation may follow treatment.

Acupuncture needles are sterile and single use only. There is no risk of infection from another patient.

DO ACUPUNCTURE NEEDLES HURT?

Acupuncture needles are thin and flexible, about the diameter of a human hair. There are solid and made from stainless steel. Insertion through the skin is not as painful as injections or giving blood. The risk of bruising and skin irritation is less than other needles.

People experience acupuncture needling differently. Some feel no pain at all. Others feel minimal transient pain as a needle penetrates the skin.

Once the needles are in place, you may experience a sense of heaviness or electricity in the area of insertion. Most patients find the treatment relaxing and many fall asleep during treatment.

ARE THERE ANY GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS?

Yes. To enhance the value of a treatment, please:

- Do not eat an unusually large meal immediately before or after your treatment.
- Do not apply lotion, ointment, or any chemical that may irritate your skin immediately before or after treatment.
- Avoid swimming pools, whirlpools and water therapy for up to two days after treatment.

- Do not over-exercise, engage in sexual activity, or consume alcoholic beverages within twenty-four hours after treatment.
- Plan your activities so that after treatment you get some rest.
- Continue to take any prescription medicines. Do not take drugs of abuse and excessive alcohol.
- Make good mental or written notes of your response to treatment and communicate this on your next visit. This will help in designing the best treatment for you.

IS ACUPUNCTURE COVERED BY HEALTH INSURANCE?

Some insurance companies currently cover acupuncture costs. Other companies do not. Each health policy must be reviewed to determine acupuncture benefits.

WHAT IS MEDICAL ACUPUNCTURE? IS IT DIFFERENT FROM ORDINARY ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is a very old medical art, and there are many approaches to learning and practicing it. Medical acupuncture is the term used to describe acupuncture performed by a doctor trained and licensed in western medicine who has also had thorough training in acupuncture as a specialty practice. Such a doctor can use one or the other approach, or a combination of both as the need arises, to treat an illness.

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