

## acupuncture

by Barbara Millar

Acupuncture is a system of healing which has been practised in China and other Eastern countries for thousands of years. It is used to treat people with a wide range of problems, the main focus being improving overall well-being. It is often used to relieve stress-related health problems and research shows it can also be effective as a means of pain relief.

### the basics



According to traditional Chinese philosophy, health is dependent on the body's motivating energy, known as Qi (pronounced 'chee'), moving in a smooth and balanced way through a series of meridians or channels beneath the skin. Qi consists of equal and opposite qualities – Yin and Yang, and when these become unbalanced, illness may result. Practitioners believe the flow of Qi can be disturbed by emotional states, such as stress, anger or grief, by poor nutrition, infections, trauma, hereditary factors and even by weather conditions. The principal aim of acupuncture is to treat the whole person in order to recover the equilibrium between the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the individual.

### how does it work?

By inserting fine needles into the channels of energy, an acupuncturist aims to stimulate the body's own healing response and restore its natural balance. Many people come to acupuncture for help with specific conditions, such as stress, anxiety, asthma, back pain, depression, migraines, rheumatism, skin conditions and ulcers. Others choose to have acupuncture as a preventive measure, to strengthen their constitution. It can also be used alongside conventional medicine in the treatment of both acute and chronic disease.

### how does it relieve stress?

Acupuncture is an holistic approach to the management of disease and the maintenance of health so there is no single way of treating stress. Acupuncturist Linda Miller points out: 'The reason one person is stressed will not be the same for another person. Stress indicates that part of your life is not in balance. I need to assess someone's general state of health in order to identify the underlying pattern of disharmony and to give the most effective treatment.'

The first consultation usually takes longer than subsequent sessions as the acupuncturist needs to ask questions about current symptoms, what treatment you have received so far, your medical history and that of your close family, diet, digestive system, sleeping patterns and emotional state. To discover how the energies are flowing in your body, the acupuncturist feels the pulses on both wrists and looks at the colour and coating of the tongue, as a guide to physical health.

'Once enough information has been gathered to determine the likely causes of the problems, I can select the most appropriate treatment,' says Linda Miller. 'The aim is to discover which energy channels need adjusting to enable an individual's specific complaint to improve and which require treatment to boost overall energy and vitality.'

where's the evidence?

According to Professor Edzard Ernst at Exeter University's Department of Complementary Medicine, there have been too few studies carried out to draw any firm conclusions about the value of acupuncture in treating stress. But he says: 'Anecdotally, however, many patients have felt the therapy useful in dealing with stress and we know that it is effective, beyond doubt, in treating migraine, low back pain, dental pain and nausea and vomiting.'

risks to watch out for

Acupuncture is thought to be acceptably safe in trained hands but should normally be avoided in the first three months of pregnancy. Mild side-effects, like drowsiness, are quite common and bleeding or bruising from needles happens occasionally.

we test the therapy

I visited acupuncturist Linda Miller at her private practice near Stirling. At the first consultation, Linda asked lots of questions about my childhood, background, medical history, lifestyle, sleep patterns and dreams and how I felt about my general state of health and energy levels. A physical examination involved taking my pulses – not just once but frequently – and looking at my tongue. She also felt my abdomen and tested the temperature of various parts of my body.

On the second visit, a week later, Linda again checked my energy levels by taking the pulses and then began to insert the needles at specific points on my body, having made a diagnosis from the information I supplied in the first session. There are around 500 recognised acupuncture sites on the body, of which 100 are most commonly used. However the areas may not be close to the parts of the body where the problem is experienced. I arrived with a thumping, work-induced, stress headache and, to relieve this, Linda inserted needles into my hands and feet. The needles are small and fine and, when inserted, produce a dull, slightly achy sensation rather than a yelp of pain. Some needles were inserted and removed very quickly, others left in place for 10 minutes or longer. The acupuncturist may also supplement the needle treatment with moxa, a smouldering herb, which is used to warm acupuncture points to encourage the body's energy to flow.

verdict: Once the needles had been inserted and left in place my stress headache started to clear up. Later that evening, despite having done a full day at work and a two-hour round-trip drive to Linda's practice, I felt an uncustomary burst of energy.

practitioners: Members of the British Acupuncture Council have completed a thorough training of at least three years in traditional acupuncture and western medical sciences, such as anatomy and physiology. They have the letters MBAcC after their name and are covered by full medical malpractice insurance. All members observe a code of ethics and a code of practice which lays down stringent standards of hygiene. Acupuncture is not generally available on the NHS although some hospitals may have a pain clinic or physiotherapy department where acupuncture is used and some GPs also treat patients with acupuncture.

costs: There is no fixed fee for acupuncture as practitioners' overheads vary, but the cost of a first consultation can be in the region of £40, with follow-up sessions around £25-£30 for an hour's treatment.