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Acupuncture Pins Down Allergy Relief

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Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, was a firm believer in the body's ability to heal itself, saying, "the natural healing force within each of us is the greatest force in getting well."

But long before Hippocrates, the ancient Chinese were already practicing what he would later preach, through the art of acupuncture.

With seasonal allergies torturing one-third of Americans, ancient acupuncture can provide a new kind of relief. While over-the-counter medications often come with unwanted side-effects, acupuncture does not. This makes it a welcome alternative for people looking for a new way to combat allergies this season.

Acupuncture is defined as a method of preventing and treating disease, illness, injury or pain by allowing the body to heal naturally and improve the way it functions. This is done by stimulating biologically significant points on the surface of the body.

In traditional Chinese medicine, these strategic points are usually stimulated by the insertion of acupuncture needles. However, in the current Westernized version of acupuncture, they can be stimulated through non-invasive techniques such as lasers.

No matter what type of stimulation is used, there is never any introduction of chemical substances into the body.

**Getting to Know Acupuncture**

The traditional Chinese medicine approach to acupuncture treatment is predicated on eight principles:

• Qi (sometimes spelled "chi") - This is the energy that gives life to all living matter. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, Qi typically refers to the functions of the internal organs as well as life force or energy.

• Yin and Yang - These two opposites make up the whole. To be healthy involves balancing Yin and Yang. Illness occurs when one of the two is either too strong or too weak.

• The Five Phases of Transformation (also known as the Five Elements) - The five elements are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. They are related to the various organs in the body and to one another in a complex manner.

• Channels – Qi flows through a system of ducts. These ducts form a network of main channels, minor capillaries and collaterals. There are 14 main interconnected channels called "meridians" through which Qi flows. Each meridian is named for the organ it is related to e.g. Heart channel.

• Points (also known as acupuncture points) – More than 400 locations on the skin connect to the 14 main meridians or channels. The stimulation of different acupuncture points can influence the activity of the corresponding meridian in a specific manner.

• Diagnosis – It is believed that the pathological changes of the internal organs are reflected on the body surface. That is why a diagnosis is made by observation of the skin, eyes, tongue, and pulse.

• Zang-Fu Theory – This explains the physiological function, pathological changes, and inter-relationships of internal organs. The five Zang organs are the Lungs, Heart, Spleen, Liver, and Kidney. The six Fu organs are the Gall Bladder, Stomach, Large Intestine, Small Intestine, Urinary Bladder and "Triple Warmer" (three areas of the body cavity).

• Chinese Syndrome – There are eight general principles that are used to differentiate among syndromes:- Yin and Yang- Exterior (Biao) and Interior (Li)- Xu (deficiency) and Shi (excess)- Cold and Heat.

**Acupuncture and Allergies**

How do all of these elements fit together in the treatment of seasonal allergies? Kath Bartlett, owner of the [**Asheville Center for Chinese Medicine**](javascript:siteSearch('Asheville%20Center%20for%20Chinese%20Medicine');)http://global.fncstatic.com/static/v/all/img/external-link.png in Asheville, N.C., noted that they are used in a two pronged, "root and branch" approach. Kath has an M.S. in traditional Chinese medicine from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, San Diego campus. She is also Board Certified in Oriental Medicine by the [**National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine**](javascript:siteSearch('National%20Certification%20Commission%20for%20Acupuncture%20and%20Oriental%20Medicine');)http://global.fncstatic.com/static/v/all/img/external-link.png.

She explained that during allergy season, when a patient comes in with a runny nose, watery eyes, and uncontrollable sneezing, the treatment emphasis is on the symptoms, or the "branch." In between allergy seasons, the patient would continue to receive treatments, but this time the emphasis is on strengthening the immune system, or the "root," also refered to as "The Righteous Qi."

Diagnosing an allergy using traditional Chinese medicine is far more individualized than it would be with Western medicine. Allergies are analyzed by the pattern of symptoms seen in the specific patient, and the treatment is designed to relieve these particular symptoms.

The diagnosis begins with the basic belief that all allergies contain an element of dampness, which is a pathological accumulation of water. At this point, Kath explained, the acupuncturist looks at the symptoms to differentiate the nature of the allergy by determining heat and cold conditions.

In a heat condition, the phlegm or expectorant is green; there is a redness or yellow coat on the tongue, and the patient has a rapid pulse. In a cold condition, the phlegm or expectorant is white or clear and the tongue has a white coating. Once this determination has been made, the acupuncturist can target the specific acupuncture points that will alleviate symptoms.

Another technique used in addition to needle insertion is what's known as "cupping." This methodology is used to help Qi circulate. "In traditional Chinese medicine, a glass glass cup is usually used. There are also bamboo and plastic ones. A flame is put in and out of the cup, which causes the air inside to evaporate. This creates a vacuum effect. I put the cup on the lungs to pull out the phlegm," described Kath.

Some acupuncturists also have herbal training, like Kath; and they incorporate herbs into the allergy treatment. She uses raw herbs or parts of the plants that are cut and dried and can be brewed into the strong-flavored teas that most people associated with herbal remedies. For patients who are turned off by the pungent flavors, granulated herbs can be mixed with water and drunk that way.

**Is Acupuncture Effective?**

How effective is traditional Chinese medicine in the treatment of seasonal allergies? In a study published in the September 2004 issue of [**Allergy magazine**](javascript:siteSearch('Allergy%20magazine');)http://global.fncstatic.com/static/v/all/img/external-link.png, the researchers concluded that a combination of Chinese herbs and weekly acupuncture sessions showed promise as a treatment for relieving the symptoms of seasonal allergies. The authors of the study recommended that future research investigate the effectiveness of an acupuncture and herb combination in the treatment of other conditions.

The study was done with 52 participants, between ages 20 and 58. The first group received a 20-minute acupuncture treatment weekly for six weeks, with points on the Large Intestine, Gallbladder, Lung and Liver meridians stimulated. Additional points were selected based on each patient's individual symptoms. They were also given an herbal blend of schizonepeta, chrysanthemum, cassia seed, plantago seed and tribulus.

Patients in the control group were given acupuncture, but at the same non-acupuncture points, which were away from meridians. They were treated with needles smaller than those used on the traditional Chinese medicine patients. Control patients also received a non-specific herbal formula comprised of coix seed, licorice, poria, hops, oryza, barley, hawthorn fruit, and medicated leaven.

At the end of the study period, participants in both groups were rated on their level of improvement. The first group treated with traditional Chinese medicine patients demonstrated improvements in allergy symptoms in the eyes and nose, higher levels of physical activity, and an improved psychological condition compared to patients in the control group.

For seasonal allergy sufferers still suffering with traditional Western medical treatments, or weighed down by unwanted side effects like drowsiness, may find relief in acupuncture. In fact, these patients may discover what Hippocrates learned centuries ago, the body has its own incredible power to heal.

*FoxNews.com health* *writer Maria Esposito contributed to this report.*

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