

How Does Acupuncture Actually Work?

Acupuncture has been practised for more than 2,000 years in China, and it is becoming ever more popular in the West. It is estimated that more than one million treatments are given per year in the UK.

There is increasingly good evidence that acupuncture can successfully treat a wide range of conditions. The World Health Organisation website lists 28 conditions for which acupuncture has been “proved through controlled trials to be an effective treatment”, including rhinitis, headache, high blood pressure, lowered immunity, rheumatoid arthritis, sciatica, back pain, and knee pain. It lists another 60 conditions for which some “therapeutic effect has been shown”, including asthma, infertility, insomnia, and pre-menstrual syndrome.

Thousands of western doctors and physiotherapists have undergone some training in acupuncture. Despite this, many people are still sceptical about acupuncture because it seems to make no sense that the insertion of tiny needles can treat disease. So how does acupuncture actually work?

Part of the answer is that the insertion of acupuncture needles causes the release of chemicals called “endorphins”. (This word is short for “endogenous morphine”. Endogenous means it is produced inside the body, and the word morphine comes from the Greek God of sleep, Morpheus.) There are many kinds of endorphins in the human body, each with a different function. Some reduce pain, some promote the healing of damaged tissue, some promote good sleep, some calm anxiety, and some play a role in hormone production. So, we can see how acupuncture can be used to treat many conditions.

Recent scientific investigations have given us more clues. Using an MRI scanner, it has been shown that the shallow insertion of needles at specific points causes increased activity in the pain control centres of the brain. However, what the neuroscientists found really interesting and surprising, was that if the needles are inserted deeper into the skin, and manipulated until the patient feels a tingling around the needle, the pain control areas become *less* active (you can see this remarkable experiment on You Tube). This would explain why experienced practitioners get better results than novices, as getting the tingling sensation is an acquired skill.

One study showed that acupuncture caused changes in the brain which promoted stroke recovery. In this experiment, normal acupuncture was compared to “sham” acupuncture, where needles are deliberately inserted in the wrong points. Only the correct acupuncture had the desired effect.

According to Chinese medicine, energy, or “qi”, gathers in certain points near the surface of the body and flows along channels called “meridians.” It has been speculated that this “qi” is a very low level of electrical impulse, and indeed acupuncture points and channels have been found to be areas of low electrical resistance. When a person is ill, the electrical activity at the acupuncture points changes. The insertion of needles helps to return the electrical activity of the acupuncture point to its normal level. Experiments have been done where substances have been injected into acupuncture points and have been observed to move along the acupuncture channels.

So, there is mounting evidence that acupuncture has real health benefits, and that it has a scientific basis of action.

Author



Henry McGrath is an Acupuncturist and the author of a number of books on traditional Chinese medicine, including *Harmony in the Face of the Tiger*, about TCM approaches to cancer. He is Academic Director at CNM (College of Naturopathic Medicine) the UK's largest training provider in natural

therapies.