

Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine

**An information sheet from the Kentucky Council Against Health Fraud
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Overview

Various methods of traditional Chinese medicine are promoted for diagnosis and treatment of a wide variety of conditions. Methods include:

- *Acupuncture*, the insertion of needles at various points, supposedly to influence the flow of *qi* “energy” in a beneficial manner
- Diagnostic methods such as *pulse diagnosis* and examination of the tongue
- Methods of relaxation and exercise (internal *qi gong*; *tai chi*)
- Projection of healing “energy” through space (external *qi gong*)
- Herbal remedies

The “theory” of traditional Chinese medicine is not valid

Traditional Chinese medicine is based on pre-scientific and invalid ideas about how the body works:

- It is based on the flow of *qi*, a type of “life force” or “energy” which is unknown to science. Supposedly *qi* not only moves through the body, but also flows in and out of the body between heaven and earth.
- *Qi* is claimed to flow through channels called *meridians*, but there are no such anatomical structures (practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine do not agree on how many meridians there are, nor do they agree on the numbers and locations of acupuncture points).
- In addition to *qi*, the body is thought to be made of “moisture” and blood, with illness related to congestion or depletion of one of these.
- An imbalance resulting in disease can also be caused by the “pernicious influences” of wind, cold, fire, dampness, dryness, and summer heat.
- There is a complex system of five organ networks, which are related to the elements wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, and also to the five planets Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Venus, and Mercury.
- In order to complete a symmetrical table of six *yin* and six *yang* organs, the Chinese invented an organ which does not exist, the “triple warmer.” However, they did not recognize the importance of the pancreas.

(over)

It is obvious that these ideas were the kinds of guesses that people could make about the body and health thousands of years ago. Since that time, scientific research has revealed in increasing detail the way the body *actually* works, and the *real* causes of disease. We can see that *the principles of traditional Chinese medicine are not correct and do not provide a rational basis for medical care.*

Acupuncture - scientific assessment

While the traditional “theory” behind acupuncture is not valid, it might still work for other reasons. There is considerable scientific research interest in testing whether effects on nerves and hormones produced by acupuncture could be medically useful. However, at this point *there is little or no evidence that acupuncture is useful for any condition.* Some scientific reviews have concluded that acupuncture is useful for certain types of pain and nausea; other reviews have reached opposite conclusions. For other types of problems, most of the results have been negative.

Many people may say that acupuncture worked for them. However, it is possible that positive results were due to the natural variability of many conditions, to the placebo effect, or to the distracting effect of the needles. Only carefully controlled studies can determine whether acupuncture is really beneficial.

But didn't the NIH say that acupuncture works?

A 1997 consensus panel of the National Institutes of Health gave support to the use of acupuncture for a few conditions (the conclusions are only those of the panel, not of the NIH itself). However, the panel consisted *only of acupuncture supporters*; critics were not included. Even so, the panel admitted that the evidence in support of acupuncture was generally poor.

But hasn't acupuncture been used for thousands of years?

What we now know as acupuncture, the insertion of fine needles, is actually only about 400 years old, and its use for relieving pain is only about 50 years old. Moreover, just because something has been used for a long time doesn't mean that it works - astrology is very old, but we now know that it makes no sense.

Scientific assessment of other aspects of traditional Chinese medicine:

- There is no scientific validity to pulse diagnosis and tongue diagnosis. Relying on these methods may be dangerous, since genuine problems may be missed. If practitioners make correct assessments, it is likely because of other information available to them.
- Internal qi gong and tai chi, like other forms of exercise and meditation, may be useful for some people. However, benefits are from normal physiological processes, not from changes in the nonexistent qi.
- External qi gong is inconsistent with scientific knowledge. “Qi masters” cannot produce any effects when studied under controlled conditions.
- Chinese herbal remedies are potentially dangerous. Like other herbal remedies, *they are drugs*, with side effects and potentially dangerous interactions with other drugs. They are mixtures of many ingredients whose identities are difficult to determine. There have been many problems of contamination with heavy metals and adulteration with conventional drugs.

Recommendations

KCAHF recommends that practitioners basing their diagnosis and/or treatment on the principles of traditional Chinese medicine be avoided. If you choose to use acupuncture for pain treatment, select a practitioner who attempts to use it in a scientific manner to influence the nerves and hormones. Chinese herbal remedies should be avoided.

Recommendations of KCAHF are based on our assessments of the scientific literature concerning unconventional approaches to health care. For specific recommendations concerning your medical condition, consult your physician.

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