

Acupuncture as a Treatment for Brain Injury

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Acupuncture is a component of a larger medical system called Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). In addition to acupuncture, TCM also includes Chinese herbal medicine, meditation and movement (Qi Gong), nutritional treatments, and massage (Tuina).

Chinese medical theory, which has formed and evolved over the last 3000 years, has a few basic ideas that guide a practitioner's diagnosis and treatment. The first important idea is that of yin and yang. Everything in the natural world can be divided into either yin or yang. Yin can be characterized as calm, dark or yielding while yang is energetic, bright or aggressive. Some examples are: the sky (yang) and the earth (yin); outside (yang) and inside (yin); high (yang) and low (yin); hot (yang) and cold (yin); the sun (yang) and the moon (yin). Yin and yang are balanced and have a creative tension in healthy systems. When they are out of balance, the society, the earth or the human body in which the imbalance exists is unhealthy.

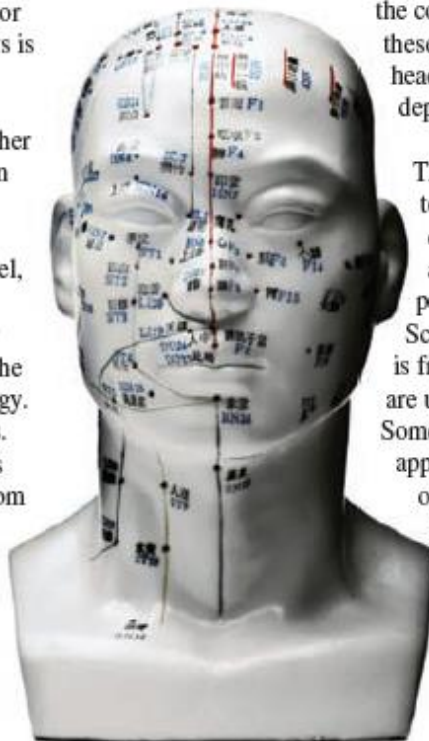
In TCM, each organ of the human body is either yin or yang. The health of the person relies on the balance and inter-related functioning of these organ systems. In TCM, each internal organ has a corresponding meridian or channel, which has a portion that manifests on the surface of the body. This brings us to another core idea in Chinese medical theory. This is the idea of Qi (chee). Qi is the vital force or energy. It is present in all things including our bodies. Within our bodies the Qi of the organs moves through the meridians and flows smoothly from meridian to meridian in the healthy state. Disease states or trauma can disrupt this orderly, smooth flow of Qi.

The TCM practitioner strives to identify imbalances of yin and yang and disruptions of the proper flow of Qi. The practitioner



then uses one or more of the several modalities of TCM to bring the sick or injured person's systems into better balance and harmony. Interestingly, the brain is not one of the standard organs in TCM. The functions of the brain are thought to be directed by other organ systems. For example, the heart is thought to govern mental activities and handle the physiologic function of the brain. For this reason, disorders or injuries of the brain are treated indirectly by treating and balancing the yin, yang and Qi in the heart, liver, spleen and other meridians.

There are no large scale controlled studies on acupuncture as a treatment of TBI and its related problems. Therefore, the acupuncture approaches to brain injury are based on the accumulated experience of practitioners who work in this field. If we think about brain injury, there are several major problems for which acupuncture may be one of the components of a treatment plan. Some of these problems are disorders of consciousness, headaches, motor control, spasticity, fatigue, depression and focus.



The acupuncturist assesses each problem trying to determine the nature of the imbalance or blockage and then selects a series of acupuncture points to needle. Acupuncture points may be on the scalp, ears, torso or limbs. Scalp acupuncture is a relatively newer style that is frequently incorporated in treatments. Needles are usually left in place for 20 to 30 minutes. Some acupuncturists use small electrical currents applied to some of the needles. Others use occasional manual stimulation of the needles.

It is standard practice for the patient to sit or lie down quietly while the needles are in place. Some individuals with brain injury are too restless to allow this and, therefore, are not good candidates for acupuncture until their restlessness improves.

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The frequency of acupuncture visits is variable. Treatments can be given as frequently as daily and as infrequently as once a week or every other week. No optimal “dosage” of acupuncture in the treatment of TBI has been determined. This is true both for the frequency of visits and for the total number of treatments. Most acupuncturists consider 10 treatments to be a “course” of treatment, although this is variable.

Acupuncture is a very safe treatment with no known side effects. There is a slight risk of bleeding especially in individuals who are on blood thinners, although most acupuncturists usually do not consider blood thinners to be a reason to withhold acupuncture. Acupuncture is usually avoided in pregnant women due to the fear of inducing early labor. There is also a very small risk of puncturing an internal organ, especially the lung, although this is exceedingly rare.

Acupuncture is performed by physicians (MDs or DOs) who have undergone specific training in acupuncture. It is also performed by individuals who are specifically trained as Oriental Medicine Doctors (OMDs) or a licensed acupuncturist (L. Ac.). Each state regulates the practice of acupuncture differently. Contact your State Board of Medicine or the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture for an acupuncturist in your area. If possible, look for an acupuncturist who has experience in treating individuals with brain injury. An ideal practitioner type would be a physiatrist or rehabilitation doctor, since he or she has extensive training in the care of patients with brain injury and may also have trained in acupuncture. To find a physiatrist in your area contact your Brain Injury Association or the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

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