

## THE ACUPUNCTURE PROGRAM

Acupuncture involves tapping into energetic meridians or pathways in the body using needles. There are 12 primary meridians and 8 extra meridians that are categorized according to yin (cool, internal, passive, etc.) and yang (hot, external, active, etc.).

While imbalances in the yin organs potentially result in hot, irritable, dry symptoms, imbalances in yang organs potentially result in cold, weak, pale symptoms. (One common example of a yin deficiency of the kidneys is menopause, during which a woman can experience feelings of heat, dryness, difficulty sleeping, or irritability.)

Traditional Chinese Medicine has been practiced in China for around 5,000 years. It involves not just acupuncture, but also Qi Gong (moving meditation), Tui Na (massage), and herbal and dietary prescriptions for bodily constitution and seasons.

One basic premise is that it is the individual's responsibility to keep themselves in balance through the use of food and plants as daily medicine, and the practice of Qi Gong or Tai Ji. The practitioner's job is to educate the patient and assist when needed using acupuncture and other methods.

According to Chinese Medicine, aging happens as we lose Qi (or Energy) and Jing (or Essence) in the body. Western lifestyles can contribute to the loss of Qi and Jing. Methods to conserve essence and energy involve the "Four Pillars of Health":

- **Proper Eating:** Moderate amounts of foods for a person's constitution and the season.
- **Proper Rest:** Resting when tired and not pushing oneself when fatigued.
- **Proper Thoughts and Emotions:** Positive thoughts and meditation, and avoiding extremes of emotion.
- **Proper Exercise:** Daily moderate exercise including brisk walks and avoiding excessive or strenuous daily exercise.

Practicing Qi Gong is an important way to replenish Jing/Essence after it has been spent. This involves both movement and visualization. For example, imagining light coming in to fill the lower part of your abdomen as you 'Gather the Qi' with your arms.

Foods and herbs are an important part of staying well and maintaining Qi and Essence. In China, eating a balance of the five flavors (sweet, salty, sour, bitter, acrid) is important at every meal. Depending on the season and your body constitution, you may need more of one flavor than another. For example, bitter foods are recommended in summer because they are cooling and cleansing. But if you are feeling deficient and weak, these may not be the proper foods for your constitution. In cooler winter weather, foods that are more warming/nourishing or acrid are generally more appropriate. This is one reason why

consuming soups with root vegetables, hot peppers, and small amounts of red meat can be so satisfying during winter months.

How can acupuncture benefit you? If you experience symptoms indicating that your body is out of balance, then acupuncture can help to alleviate those symptoms without the need for pharmaceuticals. The number of sessions it takes to resolve an issue depends on the amount of time you have been out of balance. For example, if you have back pain that began yesterday, you may feel relief after one session. However, if your back pain has persisted for years, then it may take weeks or months to return to balance, and you may also require treatment with herbs.

Acupuncture is not just for musculoskeletal issues. It can be used to treat many health issues, either alone or in conjunction with western medical modalities. One of the advantages of acupuncture (and TCM generally) is that the methods used are intended to help create health by nourishing the body, removing blockages (and/or toxins), promoting flow (i.e., energy, blood, lymph, etc.), and supporting health holistically (mind, body, and spirit).

Even if you are feeling pretty well balanced, acupuncture can help during the change of the seasons to keep you in balance, in much the same way that regular maintenance on your car helps prevent problems.

Dr. Erik Flatland is a licensed acupuncturist and trained in Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine with Dr. Yong Deng, professor at Cheng Du University, China, and head of the Master's Acupuncture Program at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine & Health Sciences.