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The Sharp End of Acupuncture 22.05.2009

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Now acupuncture has been proven to help relieve pain, writer TIM BRADY explains what you really need to know about it.

FOR a country in which one in 10 people is afraid of needles Britain appears to be having an extraordinary love affair with acupuncture. More than three million of us a year now choose the ancient Chinese medicine to treat everything from chronic pain to infertility, while the number of practitioners has topped 3,000. Even mainstream medicine is slowly opening its doors to a practice for which there remains no proven scientific explanation.

The latest development is a leading US study that shows acupuncture really can help beat back pain. After eight weeks of therapy, patients with chronic back pain reported a 60 per cent improvement in symptoms after acupuncture.

Those on conventional treatment saw only a 39 per cent improvement. The same study, carried out in Seattle, revealed patients who received a "sham" form of acupuncture, involving pricking the skin with toothpicks, also improved.

This raises further debate about whether acupuncture has a physiological effect on the body when needles pierce the skin, or whether the effects are all in the mind.

According to Chinese philosophy our state of health depends on the body's internal energy force, known as Qi (pronounced "chee"). When we are healthy Qi moves in a smooth, fluid fashion through a series of channels called meridians. If the body is faced with illness, pain or stress, the Qi is disrupted. By inserting needles into some of the body's 500 acupuncture points, the normal flow of Qi is restored.

Western medicine is at a loss to explain the benefits of this therapy. The most popular theory is that it stimulates the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkiller.



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"In some maternity units specially trained midwives use acupuncture to help control pain during childbirth," says Mike O'Farrell, chief executive of the British Acupuncture Council "It's also used to improve fertility and even to counter the side effects of cancer drugs."

One reason it has gained acceptance among doctors is that it is a safe form of treatment. The needles used are not much thicker than a human hair. Unlike those used for injections they are solid rather than hollow, which makes them easier to insert.

Each one is sterilized and pushed several millimetres into the skin. Most patients feel only a slight tingling or a dull ache. "Occasionally it does hurt," says Mike. "It shouldn't but it does. That's because, although the needles are very thin, they are going into sensitive areas."

Treatments last 20 to 40 minutes and it can take up to 12 sessions to feel the benefits.

NEEDLES HELPED ME RECOVER FROM A CAR CRASH

DALIA TERRET, 37, a kickboxing instructor with KB Fitness (www.kbfitness.co.uk) from Hampstead, North London, turned to the therapy after being left in agony from injuries following an accident.

DALIA was driving in heavy traffic on a motorway in her native South Africa in January last year when a speeding motorist ploughed into the Back of her.

"I was crawling and he was doing about 70 miles per hour," says Dalia.

"I later found out he was bending down to pick up something from the floor." The impact left, Dalia with haemorrhaging in her eyes and severe whiplash. A helicopter rushed her to hospital. "After 10 days I was discharged. I had physio twice a week but I continued to suffer terrible pains in the back of my head and neck. I took painkillers but they wore off after a while."

Dalia's physio, newly qualified in acupuncture, suggested it might help. He used a technique that involves attaching electrodes to the needles to deliver a mild current at the same time.

"After two sessions, I noticed a big improvement. and after six I stopped going altogether," says Dalia.

"It was amazing. Now I feel absolutely fine. The painkillers were only a short-term solution but acupuncture was a long-term one."

<http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/101937/The-sharp-end-of-acupuncture>



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