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TRY ACUPUNCTURE

special report: acupuncture

Scientists are just starting to figure out how and why acupuncture works. But for people seeking pain relief when Western medicine has failed, there's only one question that matters: Will it work for you?

Emily Laber-Warren

Kimberly Adams was training for her first triathlon when she felt a sudden and excruciating pain in her neck. A social worker and mom of two, she suspected that toting around her 7-month-old daughter might have contributed to the injury. Adams saw a doctor, who ruled out a pinched nerve and sent her to a chiropractor. An x-ray showed nothing structurally wrong and the chiropractor made some adjustments, but the pain persisted.

Desperate, Adams, 33, turned to acupuncture. And on her third visit — after 3 weeks of unremitting pain — something radical happened. The acupuncturist wiggled a needle in Adams's calf while massaging the painful muscle in her neck; the neck muscle began to relax, and 40 seconds later it felt better.

"Literally the next day, the pain was completely gone," Adams says.

Adams, of Scotch Plains, New Jersey, has been pain-free since May and recently completed her second triathlon. Researchers don't quite understand how a needle inserted into one body part can heal another, and some doctors consider the practice at best a nebulous, power-of-positive-thinking sort of thing. But for the 2 million Americans who are treated annually with acupuncture, recent clinical studies have shown that the practice affects the body in measurable ways — reducing blood pressure, for example, and increasing the circulation of endorphins, natural pain-relieving chemicals.

In 1997 the National Institutes of Health approved acupuncture for certain kinds of nausea and pain and listed 11 other conditions, including addiction, asthma, carpal tunnel syndrome, and menstrual cramps, for which it showed potential. Scores of new studies are published each year, evaluating acupuncture's effectiveness in treating everything from Parkinson's disease to depression. And thousands of physicians have incorporated acupuncture into their practices — the country's most prestigious training program, at UCLA's medical school, has graduated 5,000 doctor-acupuncturists over the past 2 decades.

Acupuncture is based on the traditional Chinese teaching that energy, or qi (pronounced "chee"), courses through the body along channels called meridians; illness occurs when that flow is disrupted. Scientists are starting to identify some of the physiological mechanisms at work, and there's evidence that the insertion of needles into designated acupuncture points speeds the conduction of electromagnetic signals within the body. These signals may increase the flow of endorphins and other pain-relieving chemicals, as well as immune system cells, which aid healing.

But for the patients it has helped, the "why" and "how" it works don't matter as much as the fact that it does.

Nicole Cashman, 33, who heads her own public relations firm in Philadelphia and New York City, had suffered from allergies all her life. But when she fell for a man with two dogs, her problem escalated from annoyance to life crisis. After just minutes at her boyfriend's house, itchy eyes and other painful symptoms would set in, forcing her to flee. An allergy doctor had her try Zyrtec pills, steroidal eye drops, and a prescription nasal spray. The medications quelled her symptoms, but left her with dry eyes, headaches, and intense drowsiness. "I was like a walking zombie," she says.

Cashman's mom, a pediatric nurse practitioner, suggested she try acupuncture. Though nervous, Cashman began seeing Marshall Sager, D.O., for 20-minute sessions every 2 weeks. He treated her with needles in her face, shins, hands, chest, and other parts of her body. Within a month she was off her meds and sleeping over at her boyfriend's. "I've had amazing results," says Cashman, who has been allergy- and medication-free for more than 2 years and now sees Dr. Sager for semi-annual tune-ups. "I consider myself completely cured."

I've changed into a flimsy gown and am waiting for the acupuncturist, Phillip Shinnick, Ph.D., to return. I'm here mostly because of frequent sinus infections, but a couple of other things are on my mind — like my jaw, which is tight from grinding my teeth at night, and, given the fact that I've been trying to get pregnant for 7 months, acupuncture's reputation for increasing fertility. The room is casually disheveled, an odd melding of doctor's office (sink and white-tiled floor) and massage studio (Buddha wall art and padded examining table).

Shinnick isn't a doctor, but he has studied physiology intensely. (Actually, he's done a lot of things intensely. He set the world record in 1963 for the long jump and competed in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.) He was a history and sociology professor at Rutgers when a car accident led him to seek physical therapy at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Doctors there sensed his natural gift for healing and suggested he seek training; he went on to study with several top physicians with expertise in Eastern medicine. From there he proceeded to teach acupuncture to doctors at New York Medical College.

Based on my reading, I'm expecting this first session to start with a medical history and then move in a less traditional direction, with him feeling my pulse, examining my tongue, and asking questions like, "What three adjectives would you use to describe yourself?" In traditional Chinese medicine, the world consists of five elements: fire, water, earth, wood,

and metal. One or two elements are dominant in each of us, and they're considered a fair predictor of both health issues and psychological tendencies. "It's the feng shui of the body," explains Ann Cotter, M.D., a physician and acupuncturist at Morristown Memorial Hospital in Morristown, New Jersey. A "fire" person and a "metal" person, though they have the same complaint, are likely to receive needles in different places.

But Shinnick merely asks about my principal complaints and medical history, then palpates my whole body, stopping to make marks on a rough human outline he's sketched. I see him circle my shoulders, the left side of my lower back, my left thigh, and both calves. He's done Chinese medical typing, he says, but he finds it more efficient to examine a person's body; all the information he needs resides there.

With a speed that would seem like impatience if he weren't being so attentive, he points out problems.

My stomach and pancreas are in spasm.

My right hip is locked, and it's pressing on my ovary.

I have a scattering of tiny bumps on my cheeks.

"There's congestion in these points," he says. "It's been this way for a long time."

His plan: Two needles in my lower back, two in my shoulders. Another in my abdomen, near my right hip. Tap-tap, tap-tap. I feel microsecond pinpricks, and in some spots, a numb, achy sensation.

Shinnick attaches clips to the needles and starts what looks like a car battery. I feel pulses of electricity alternating from one needle to the next. It feels odd but not uncomfortable, though my abdomen is visibly convulsing. Acupuncturists insert their thin needles, as many as a dozen at a time, into any of more than 300 points. Placement varies from one session to the next, in response to the patient's changing condition, and the practitioner may twist the needles or apply a weak electrical current. I lie there, a reposing pincushion, as Shinnick attends to patients in other rooms, and ponder his comments. At least one of them seems eerily on target. I've felt soreness in my lower-right abdomen for years, and in a recent test I had to make sure my fallopian tubes were clear, the right one was so constricted that the doctor had to force the dye solution through it.

Twenty minutes later Shinnick is back. The needles come out, snip-snap. My problems are neatly connected. "To me, everything fits," he says. My stomach is in knots, he explains, which is causing the outbreak on my face. The tension in my shoulders is keeping my sinuses in crisis and contributing to my jaw clenching. The blockage in my hip is hampering my ovary.

"I can completely eliminate all your tension," he says, "but you'll put it back." Unless, that is, I change my habits. He teaches me to breathe deeply into my stomach, relaxing my face on the exhale. "You need to practice these self-care techniques every single day from now until the day you die," he tells me. Most acupuncturists don't expect their clients to work so hard between sessions, but then again most treat patients regularly for weeks or months at a time. Shinnick believes two or three sessions are usually sufficient. "If it's going to work, it'll work fast," he says.

It's Looney Tunes," says Stephen Barrett, M.D., a retired psychiatrist who operates the Quackwatch Web site. "Meridians and qi are part of a delusional system." Dr. Barrett is referring to the vocabulary of acupuncture. Qi has no counterpart in Western medicine, and the meridians are not visible structures. "It's two worlds," Dr. Cotter says. "It's like learning a new language."

Western doctors treat problems that patients have; Eastern doctors treat patients who have problems. "Western medicine has a tendency to stop or alter processes. Just think about the names of our medicines: antibiotics, antihistamines, interferon," Dr. Sager says. "Acupuncture enhances the body's inherent ability to heal itself."

Since being validated by the NIH in 1997 for nausea and postoperative dental pain, acupuncture has shown promise for other ailments. In 2004 alone researchers documented its effectiveness in treating at least 25 medical problems. But none of those studies was sufficiently large or well designed to be definitive.

That doesn't mean the studies are wrong, only that they are not the final word. No company stands to profit from the revelation that acupuncture works, so it's hard to fund the large, costly studies that Western medicine requires for proof. In addition acupuncture isn't easily standardized the way Western treatments are — decisions about needle placements change each session based on how the patient is feeling — so it's hard to design an objective study.

Victor Sierpina, M.D., a physician at the University of Texas Medical Branch and author of a recent review of the medical literature on acupuncture, says acupuncture has been shown to work for at least two and osteoarthritis of the knee. A 2004 study of 570 patients published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* showed that those who received acupuncture for 26 weeks scored 33 percent better on tests of pain and joint immobility than did patients who received sham acupuncture.

While definitive proof is scarce, anecdotal reports are not. Dr. Sierpina himself has successfully used acupuncture to help patients with migraine and tension headaches, back pain, irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, tendinitis, neuralgia, allergies, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, asthma, and menstrual cramps. Other doctor-acupuncturists told me they've had results with acute ankle sprains, tennis elbow, male and female infertility, sinus infections, and the common cold. "I hear from patients weeks later, 'I still feel great.' That outcome is demonstrable. It's real," says Elizabeth Huntoon, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation doctor at the Mayo Clinic who is also a certified acupuncturist. "If you have enough patients saying that to you, you start to believe you're doing something right."

Many patients undergo a series of visits over weeks or months before feeling better, or feel some improvement but not a total cure. And there are some who, though their symptoms seem treatable, don't respond to acupuncture at all. No one knows why; some attribute it to acupuncturists with insufficient skills or to individual body differences.

"It may be genetic — specific pain receptors may be diminished in some people," says Brian Berman of the University of Maryland school of medicine, who headed the knee osteoarthritis study. Nonresponders tend to be people who've been in pain for years; and advocates suspect that even they could be helped but that entrenched problems take longer and many patients give up too soon.

A nifty little \$200 device by my bed tracks my hormone levels based on urine samples I provide each morning. For the past 7 months, it's been the same drill: a couple days of high fertility before and after ovulation, which for me happens several days earlier than the optimal day 14 or 15, followed by low fertility the rest of the month. But after I start acupuncture, things change. This month I register high fertility for 17 days straight. The downside: I don't ovulate. The upside: Something seems to be shifting inside me.

I can't help but think of Eliana Jacobs, 42, an acupuncture patient I'd interviewed. She'd had trouble conceiving her first child, but the second go-round was even worse. Over several years she had an ectopic pregnancy that cost her a fallopian tube and four in-vitro fertilization procedures at two top fertility clinics in New York City. The doctors found nothing wrong with her eggs, but they failed to develop into sturdy embryos. "After four IVF procedures, which are physically and mentally grueling, I had nothing to show for it," she says.

As a last-ditch effort, Jacobs went to an acupuncturist who specialized in fertility. She was told it could take 3 to 6 months of regular treatments to restore her body to equilibrium. Jacobs decided to give it a try, then do one last round of IVF. She went dutifully twice a week, though she felt no physical difference and had no idea whether acupuncture was working. Six months later though, she found she'd gotten pregnant on her own, and went on to have a second healthy girl.

Was Jacobs's experience mere coincidence? Hard to say. A 2002 German study showed promise for acupuncture in helping women undergoing IVF become pregnant. Eighty women were given acupuncture 25 minutes before and after embryo transfer; another 80 were not. The pregnancy rate of those who received acupuncture was 42.5 percent, as opposed to 26.3 percent for those who didn't.

Some of the most interesting research about how acupuncture works involves brain scans. In one of the first such studies, published in 1998 in a prestigious medical journal, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers needled subjects on the side of the foot in points that are thought to affect the eyes while taking images of their brains in an fMRI machine. The part of the brain associated with vision lit up, just as it did when a bright light was shone in the subjects' eyes. Needling in other parts of the foot did not cause the response.

Acupuncture seems to work best for problems that Western medicine struggles to treat — hot flashes, recurrent infections, back pain, and other chronic conditions that don't register on x-rays or blood tests — not extreme medical conditions. Advocates also point to the fact that acupuncture has virtually no side effects: a well-trained practitioner will use sterilized, disposable needles, eliminating the chance of infection. The worst that patients can expect is some bruising or a brief feeling of faintness. Hence practitioners say acupuncture is a good option when other treatments have failed — or when Western medicine has no answers.

Which is pretty much where I find myself right now. A blood test I recently took indicated that my chances of getting pregnant are low, but the doctor who ordered the test, a fertility specialist, had no remedy to suggest except to wait and take the test again, as results may vary from month to month. Meanwhile my current cycle, the second since I started acupuncture, is the best yet; this time I register high fertility early on, then ovulate on day 15 — the ideal scenario.

What it all means for me I don't yet know, but the changes in my body make me feel certain that the acupuncture is doing something. Acupuncture doesn't work for everybody all the time, but it clearly does work for some people some of the time. And I hope I'll be one of them.

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