

== **health & wellbeing** ==

ALTERNATIVE 101:

Acupressure

BY HEATHER PEAKE

Despite its reputation as being simply “acupuncture without needles,” acupressure is actually the older sister of a whole range of therapeutic arts revolving around the manipulation of the body’s pressure points: acupuncture and tuina in China, shiatsu and jin shin do in Japan, reflexology in the West, and other less formalized systems elsewhere.

The Chinese began experimenting with acupressure more than 5,000 years ago. According to folklore, soldiers returning from battle with superficial wounds began reporting that they were miraculously cured of injuries and illnesses that had plagued them, often for years. Curious physicians began charting the location of these wounds, and a science was born.

Over many centuries, physicians theorized that the vital life energy they called *chi* or *qi* traveled through the body via 14 invisible pathways running vertically along the body called meridians. Poor health was seen as the result of energy becoming blocked at points along a meridian. Deep finger pressure applied at these points released the blockage, allowing the *chi* to flow normally.

Meridians correspond to the major organs of the body: lung, heart, pericardium, large intestine, small intestine, the “triple burner,” liver, kidney, spleen, stomach, bladder and gallbladder. Additionally, there are two major reservoirs of *chi* that

regulate the entire system: the Governor Vessel, running up the spine, over the top of the head to the upper jaw, and the Conception Vessel, running up the front of the body to the lower jaw.

Each meridian passes close to the skin’s surface at spots called *hsueh*, translated as “cave” or “hollow,” or, less poetically, as “points” or “acupoints.” Early texts identified about 365 points, but refinements in the system over the years have uncovered hundreds more – 1200 to 2000, depending on whom you ask. Some practitioners believe that the most effective points lay at the very beginning or the very end of the meridians, or in places where the meridians converge, such as the hands, feet, or ears.

Points are assigned a letter and number code for easy reference – for example, B 10 (“B” for the bladder line) is a point located about a half-inch from the base of the skull on the muscles bordering on the spine, considered useful in relieving fatigue and depression.

Each point also has a Chinese character name, usually descriptive and sometimes quite beautiful. B 10 is also called the “Heavenly Pillar.” Other points carry names like “Sea of Vitality,” “Hidden Clarity,” and “Wind Pond.”

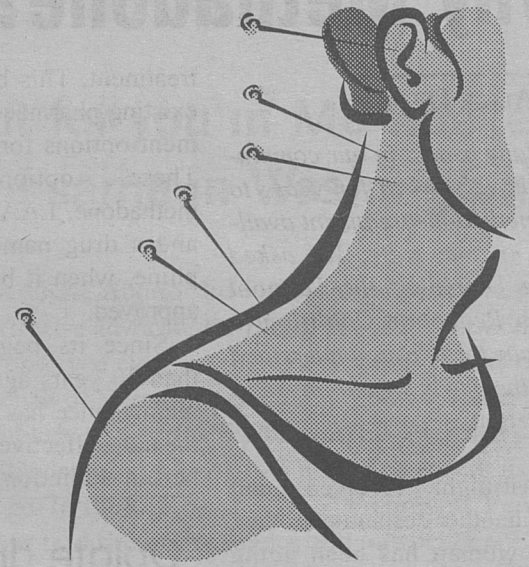
Studies have shown acupressure to be effective in the relief of muscle and joint pain and general tension. Women find it useful in lessening the discomfort of menstrual

cramps and morning symptoms. It can also aid in reducing the impact of migraines and arthritis. Its usefulness in controlling behavioral problems like addiction, weight loss and depression is less quantifiable, but some people do swear by it.

Of course, many Western scientists, who tend to see all traditional Chinese medicine as a lot of simple tricks and nonsense, have dismissed these studies. Still, as we gain a better awareness of the way our bodies work, it begins to seem less far-fetched.

Scientists have long known that vigorous stimulation of the body releases our own natural painkillers, called endorphins. Another study, out of the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center, used a scanning technique called SPECT – that’s “single photon emission computed tomography,” in case you didn’t know – to prove that acupuncture increased blood flow to the thalamus, the area of the brain that registers the body’s response to pain. And researchers continue to study the powerful results of the “placebo effect.”

While you can visit a practitioner for treatment, one nice thing about acupressure is that it can be self-administered, either alone or with the help of a partner. There are several excellent books on the market, and, of course, tons of information on the web. See the “Articles” page of the Acupressure Institute site and



Acupressure WEB SITES

Acupressure Institute site
www.acupressure.com

Acupressure: A Science of Life
www.dishant.com/acupressure/

“What Is Acupressure?”
www.garynull.com/Documents/articlesfromorgs/acupressure.htm

OnHealth.com
www.onhealth.com/alternative/resource/althealth/item,15020.asp

at Acupressure: A Science of Life, and “What Is Acupressure?” OnHealth.com provides a acupressure chart that is fairly easy to read. For actual practice, you’ll want to find a book showing the points in more detail.

Acupressure is generally considered safe for most people, but if you suffer from osteoporosis, orthopedic or spinal injuries, have bleeding disorders, are on anticoagulant drugs or long-term steroid treatments, you’ll want to consult with your doctor first. And while acupressure points can

relieve the symptoms of morning sickness and help control labor pain, pregnant women need to avoid the many pressure points that stimulate uterine contractions. ▼

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