

The Art of Acupuncture

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If you associate needles in a medical setting with getting an injection or having your blood drawn, you may be wary of acupuncture. While this ancient technique does involve needles, acupuncture can be a gentle healing experience, explains Ken Rosen, a licensed acupuncturist based in Huntington, New York. Along with him, I'll give you a behind-the-scenes look at this age-old practice, which helps promote the flow of subtle energy (*qi*) throughout the body along invisible channels called meridians

The needles. Acupuncture needles are different from those used in Western medicine. A hypodermic needle is larger, thicker, and has a hollow tip designed to break the skin. Acupuncture needles are smaller, often no thicker than an ultra-thin wire (roughly twice the thickness of a human hair). They have a solid point that easily slips into tissue, usually with-out causing skin damage or bruising.

Needles were once made of stone and pressed onto acupuncture points rather than piercing the skin. Other early needles were made of sharpened bone or bamboo shoots, which eventually gave way to metals. Most acupuncture needles today are made of stain-less steel and are disposable, coming in sterile packaging for one-time use. Needles vary in length and width; the most commonly used are one inch or slightly longer.

To Westerners, Chinese needling techniques may be considered more robust than Japanese methods, which are subtler. "I use needles from Korea, which are easy to work with," says Rosen. Whether acupuncture hurts or not mainly depends on needle thickness. Certain acupuncture points and techniques, along with the condition that's being treated, can determine whether a point will be sensitive. I know some patients who have found some Chinese acupuncture practices to be painful.

Needling. Depending on the treatment goal, as few as one needle or as many as 15 or more may be used, but on average 10 to 12 slender needles will be placed at a time. The number used may not be relevant, points out Rosen, since "you can give effective care with one." Needles are often first placed in a tubular holder or guide to prevent them from bending when placed on the skin. Then the practitioner taps the holder, leaving the needle at its desired depth (usually about 1/4 inch). Fleshier skin on the backside, legs, and upper arms may need deeper needle insertion, while areas with less

padding or slimmer people might require more shallow insertion.

Once inserted, needles are often gently stimulated, meaning they may be twirled to enhance the effects of therapy. Some practitioners may stimulate them with heat or low-voltage electrical impulses. According to Rosen, the needles are the paths through which an acupuncturist sends healing messages to the whole body, and proper stimulation helps send this message with more or less strength.

Needling sensation. Needles are typically left in the skin for about 20 minutes, during which time the patient might sleep, listen to music, or practice relaxation techniques. Most people feel a slight pinch when the needles are inserted, but it rarely hurts and isn't usually uncomfortable. Next comes a sensation that may be described as warmth, mild tingling, numbness, heaviness, or a release of pressure.

"Acupuncture has a balancing effect on the entire body and mind," suggests Rosen. "Treatment should catapult your whole being into a deep state of ease, so you can naturally overcome energy imbalances, pain, or disease." (For more on acupuncture for specific medical conditions, see the February 2004 issue.)