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## Acupuncture for Weight Loss

### Can Acupuncture Be Used as an Alternative or Complementary Medicine to Help with Weight Loss?

By K. Cauldwell

One of the most common questions I get from patients inquiring about the acupuncture clinic I run is whether acupuncture can help people with weight loss. The answer is yes. Acupuncture can be a very effective tool in the struggle to take off the pounds, and I certainly recommend it as a complementary therapy to a patient's diet and exercise regime. However, please note that I said that I recommend acupuncture as a *complementary* therapy, not as an *alternative* therapy for weight loss. Acupuncture can bolster a patient's resilience, help fight cravings, and enhance a patient's ability to respond positively to good diet and exercise choices, but acupuncture can not fight the fight for the patient. The work still has to be done.

#### Takeaways

☑ Acupuncture can help the patient to fight cravings, increase energy, and improve overall well-being.

☑ Acupuncture is safe in the hands of a well trained professional.

☑ While acupuncture can help, there is currently no "magic bullet" to healthy weight loss.

#### What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a form of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that was developed in China at least 3,000 years ago, and may date back as many as 5,000 years. A word made up of the roots "acus" meaning needle, and "puncture" meaning the piercing of the skin, acupuncture literally translates to "puncture with needles." By placing hair-fine needles into the skin at strategic points in the body known as "acupuncture points," acupuncture can help to promote healing, alleviate pain, calm spasms and ticking, bolster the immune system, and generally encourage good health in myriad ways.

The focus of acupuncture treatment is the "qi" (pronounced "chee") or the life energy of the body. It is the belief of practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine that the qi is flowing through every living thing, and that it is what allows life to occur. Qi flows through the body through channels known as meridians. There are twelve major meridians of the body (and several minor meridians), which are associated with twelve major organ systems of the body. These are the lung, the large intestine, the stomach, the spleen, the heart, the small intestine, the bladder, the kidney, the pericardium, the san jiao (recognized as an organ only in TCM, and is considered to be a heat source of the body), the gall bladder, and the liver meridians. It is through these meridians that the qi flows, promoting life and well being, and affecting the quality of the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health.

It is believed that when the qi is out of balance, blocked, or stagnated, illness and pain result. Pain and illness can also cause the imbalance of the qi, as the chicken and the egg are interconnected, and one will always come first. The process of acupuncture, of the placing of needles into the acupuncture points (which fall along the meridians) corresponding with the location of the disharmony of the qi will restore the qi to balance and allow it to flow freely again, thereby alleviating the symptomatic problems.

Aside from the needling of acupuncture, there are other devices the acupuncturist may use to help restore the quality of the qi and return the body's systems to order. The application of specific herbs, which are heated and smolder above the appropriate acupuncture points, known as moxibustion, sends warmth down into the points. Cupping is the placement of small glass cups on the skin of the back. The air inside the cups is either filled with hot smoke, which causes the skin under the cups to be drawn up into the body of the cup as the air inside cools, or a suction gun is attached to the outside of the cup which suctions the air out. This suctioning of the skin can draw toxins from the body and promote healing and balance. Similarly the application of a small amount of electrical current to the end of the acupuncture needle, at high or low frequency, sends the current down into the point, providing the point with added stimulus.

#### What does a patient experience during an acupuncture session?

The acupuncturist will examine the patient first and take a comprehensive medical history. Some of the examination is unique to acupuncture and may seem odd to the patient. For instance, the acupuncturist will take the patient's pulse, but in doing so, he or she will generally take it three times, and will alternate which fingers he or she is using to read the pulse. The patient's tongue will also be examined, as deficiencies of the vital organs and depletions of qi are evident in the shape, texture, and color of the tongue.

After the examination, the patient will lie down on a massage table, either prone or supine, and the acupuncturist will place some needles in the body. The number and location of the needle sites will vary patient-to-patient, and often visit-to-visit, depending on the needs of the patient at that point. Needles may be placed in the part of the body that is causing the patient trouble, or they may be inserted into locations nowhere near the source of the pain or problem.

For most, acupuncture treatments are completely painless. The needles are very fine (the average diameter of an acupuncture needle is 0.015"), and they are solid. What many patients don't realize is that most of the pain that they have experienced due to needle insertion in the medical setting is caused by the hole in the center of the blood draw or injection needle, which allows fluid to be either drawn or injected through the shaft of the needle. This hole causes there to be some resistance as the needle is inserted, which pulls on the skin and causes most of the sting that the patient feels. Due to the solid and tiny nature of the needles, acupuncture needles can be inserted into the outer layers of the skin with no or very little discomfort.

Occasionally, if there is a high concentration of qi blocked around a particular point, the patient may experience a small twinge of pain, similar in feeling to a bug bite, and this feeling will typically subside as the treatment continues and the blockage begins to resolve.

Once the needles are in place, the patient will lie quietly in a dim room, generally with soft, non-lyrical, music playing, for anywhere from ten to thirty minutes, depending on the current need of the patient.

### **How can acupuncture help with weight loss?**

Acupuncture can help a patient in the struggle to achieve weight loss and to make healthy eating and exercise choices in several ways. By helping to curb cravings, acupuncture provides the patient with an enhanced ability to abstain from addictive foods like sugars and carbohydrates. Acupuncture can bolster the level of energy in the body, making it easier for the patient to maintain an exercise routine and stay active during the day. By helping to regulate sleep, the effects of acupuncture are also beneficial to the promotion of weight loss, as regular sleeping patterns sustain the body throughout the day, help to maintain a balanced lifestyle, and allow the metabolism to find a healthy, steady rhythm. Most importantly, during acupuncture treatments, the body releases endorphins, popularly known as the "feel good" chemicals of the body. Immediately following an acupuncture treatment, many patients report feeling relaxed, energized, and positive in frame of mind. This optimistic attitude and sense of overall well-being assist the patient throughout the day to make health conscious choices and maintain a positive lifestyle which will help them in their ability to be successful in their weight loss goals.

### **Is acupuncture safe?**

There are few negative side effects to the use of acupuncture. The most common adverse affects include bruising or slight swelling around the needle site, or soreness. Occasionally, due to the relaxing nature of the procedure and the calming affect of acupuncture on the energy of the body, patients may report a slightly sedated feeling, and in rare occasions, experience a vasovagal (wooziness, fainting) episode. These responses are generally mild and resolve quickly. There have been very few cases of serious injury due to acupuncture treatment, however, as with all medical therapies, patients should discuss possible side effects of acupuncture before beginning treatment.

Because acupuncture employs the use of needles, it is also important to ensure that the practitioner is maintaining appropriate safety precautions regarding the sterilization of the needles. Most acupuncturists today use disposable needles, which are discarded immediately after use in one patient. If the acupuncturist is not using disposable needles, it is appropriate to inquire about their sterilization procedures.

### **Will acupuncture work for you?**

Unfortunately, as with Western medical treatments, no one therapy works for all people for weight loss. To date, no one really understands how the mechanism of acupuncture works, nor do they know why it is more successful for some than for others. Many people argue that the success of acupuncture is due to a placebo effect, however, there have been many clinical studies conducted which support its efficacy in myriad ailments and conditions. Acupuncture has also been successfully utilized in small children and animals.

In healthy weight loss, there is no magic bullet. Regardless of the assistance provided, there is going to be some hard work required on the part of the patient to achieve his or her weight loss goal. What acupuncture can provide is another weapon in their arsenal as they fight to stay healthy.

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