



"Primary Care Naturally"

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Acupuncture and Its Role in the Treatment of Chronic Pain

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Chronic Pain - It's a worldwide epidemic. In the United States alone, chronic pain affects more people than diabetes, heart disease and cancer combined. In 2008, the American Pain Foundation (APF) reported that at some point in their lives, nearly 80% of all people living in North America and Europe will suffer from some form of disabling chronic foot, hip, back or neck pain. And chronic pain is the leading cause of medical costs in the US and the second leading cause of doctor's visits - second only to the common cold.

Unfortunately, the most common outcome of a visit to the doctor for chronic pain is a subsequent trip to the pharmacy to fill a prescription for pain medication. Over the counter (OTC) and prescription pain medications such as ibuprofen (Advil), naproxen (Aleve), hydrocodone (Vicodin) and oxycodone (Percocet) can all be exceptionally helpful in reducing inflammation and other debilitating symptoms associated with chronic pain. However, these medications can come with substantial unwanted side effects and can, in some cases, become habit forming and highly addictive. And ultimately, though these medications are helpful in reducing pain, they do very little in alleviating the underlying root cause of the pain.

One form of pain relief therapy that has been gaining increasing interest and acceptance has been the practice of acupuncture. Though widely used in China and other parts of Asia for centuries, the popularity of Acupuncture has been growing steadily here in the west for the past fifty years. According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), an estimated 3.1 million U.S. adults and 150,000 children had used acupuncture in the previous year.¹ Why are so many people turning to acupuncture to treat their chronic pain conditions? Simply put: It works!

During my years in practice, I have found the cause of chronic pain for my patients has been predominantly due to what I like to refer to as, a "muscular imbalance." Essentially, one of the muscles in a particular area of the body is not functioning properly due to being overstretched or from being in a state of chronic spasm or tension. In either case, when this occurs, the muscle in question becomes weak and the muscles in the surrounding area have to accommodate for this dysfunction. This leads to muscles functioning in ways their not designed to which leads to structural abnormalities with the end result being chronic pain.

In the treatment of chronic pain conditions, acupuncture works in two primary ways. 1) By inserting needles into designated acupuncture points, we can stimulate these imbalanced

¹ National Institutes of Health / National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine website. (www.nccam.nih.gov)

muscles to either contract from being overstretched, or to release from a state of chronic spasm, thereby restoring function, range of motion, and relieving pain. 2) Acupuncture stimulates the peripheral nervous system. This stimulation of the nervous system sends messages to the brain which responds by secreting various hormones and neurotransmitters into the bloodstream. When these naturally occurring endorphins are distributed throughout the body, they work as effective pain killers that are completely free of side effects. In fact, if patients note any side effects at all, they report a pleasurable state of relaxation and a generalized feeling of well-being. As more and more people grow weary of the potentially harmful side effects of pharmaceuticals and look to avoid costly and unnecessary surgeries that are often times only minimally effective, people are turning to the centuries old art of acupuncture to help them relieve their chronic pain. Where the pharmaceutical approach to pain management is merely to help alleviate the symptoms, Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) work by both relieving the symptoms as well as alleviating the underlying root cause of pain. And best of all, it's been proven to work – for centuries.