

HISTORY OF ACUPRESSURE

The history of acupressure predates that of acupuncture with evidence suggesting its use some 5,000 years ago. Although acupressure didn't evolve in any specific country, it is often attributed to ancient Asian civilisations. Records document the use of acupressure by the Chinese Shang dynasty between the 16th to 11th centuries BC.

Acupressure now forms part of what is known as 'Traditional Chinese Medicine' (TCM) and has evolved into a number of styles including Jin Shen, Shiatsu and Tuina. These acupressure techniques focus on the body's 'meridian' system and associated pressure points. East Asian martial arts also make use of the system for self-defence. The pressure points are said to incapacitate opponents.

Acupressure, as with other TCM therapies, was introduced to 17th century Europe by returning doctors and missionaries from the Far East. The first medical studies of acupressure in Britain didn't begin until the 1950s.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Ancient Chinese philosophy states that acupressure restores the balance of Yin and Yang by freeing our life energy or qi (chi) that flows through channels (known as meridians) under the skin. By putting pressure on specific points (known as 'acupoints') of the channels that have become blocked, the acupressure practitioner stimulates the body's healing response and thereby helps to restore its natural balance.

A scientific explanation for acupressure is that the pressure applied to the acupoints releases tension in muscle fibres and stimulates deep sensory nerves in the body. This causes a chemical release of endorphins and other substances. These substances, once released in the body, can help with pain relief, assist healing or be used for anaesthetic purposes.

Acupressure techniques also involve elements of massage which improves other functions in the body such as hormone release (responses to injury and stress), circulation (blood pressure and heart rate) and digestion (secretion of gastric acid).

A TYPICAL APPOINTMENT

Be prepared - It is advisable to choose an acupressurist who is a member of, or is accredited by, an association or professional body. This ensures your acupressure session is carried out in a suitable environment and by someone who has received formal training and ongoing development. Members are also bound to a code of ethics and practice. The main acupressure organisations are listed at the foot of this article.

Many acupressurists employ other techniques and systems based on acupressure. On finding an acupressure practitioner, ask about the methods they use, their expertise and some testimonials from previous clients.

Before your appointment, spend time thinking about your condition and what you expect to achieve with acupressure. Make some notes before you attend about your expectations and concerns. If you have a few conditions, put them in order so the acupressurist can address the most severe first. Secondary problems can then be addressed further down the line.

Don't drink alcohol on the day of your appointment but do drink plenty of water. Have a light meal (nothing spicy or fatty) a couple of hours before you see the acupressurist as they may apply pressure to your stomach which would prove uncomfortable to you with a heavy or undigested meal. Avoid any activity that requires too much exertion and allow plenty of time to get to your appointment; hurrying will affect your physical and mental well-being and be detrimental to the effects of the therapy.

You will not need to undress for your acupressure session but it is advisable to wear loose, comfortable clothing so the acupressurist can get easy access to the pressure points on the body. Make sure your skin is clean and dry but avoid applying creams or oils as these can make the skin slippery to the touch. Also avoid wearing earrings and watches as these cover pressure points.

WHAT TO EXPECT

During your appointment the acupressurist will first make a diagnosis using information provided by you about your general health, your symptoms, your diet, quality of your bowel movements and sleep patterns.

They may also use various physical examinations such as looking at your tongue and its colour, shape and coating (the tongue is said to show any imbalance within the meridians of the body). The acupressurist may check each wrist for six pulses that give information about the health of your internal organs and the body in general. They may also press on the acupoints around the body to check for tenderness and pain. Once the diagnosis has been made, the acupressurist will explain your specific treatment and what changes to expect through its course.

You will then lie down on a couch and the acupressurist will begin to apply pressure to specific acupoints using their fingers, thumbs, elbows and sometimes knees. You may feel a mild sensation but it should not be painful. Many patients find the sensation extremely relaxing.

The acupressurist may use various acupressure based methods for your treatment. One such method is called 'Tuina'. This is a more vigorous massage technique that involves stretching and corrective exercises. Your acupressurist will discuss alternatives with you beforehand.

TIMINGS / COST / SESSIONS

Treatment times vary and your first appointment will usually take a little longer while the acupressurist gains an idea of your condition and explains the therapy to you. Expect your first acupressure session to last up to an hour and a half. Subsequent sessions will usually be an hour in length with some practitioners offering 30 minute sessions.

As a general guide, a first visit can cost from £30 - £50 with subsequent appointments slightly lower but be aware that prices vary from town to town and acupressurist's overheads vary so check with your local practitioners first.

You may find that you feel the benefits of acupressure from your first treatment and after your first two or three appointments you and your acupressurist will have a good idea of the effectiveness of the treatment. It is recommended that a course last between four and six treatments but your acupressurist will advise you on this based on your progress.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Acupressure has proved to be an effective therapy for many people with varying conditions. Cancer patients are among those who have benefited from the therapy through the relief of nausea brought on by chemotherapy. The therapy is also becoming increasingly popular during pregnancy helping alleviate morning sickness, backache, and heartburn.

Certain acupoints on the body are unsafe particularly during pregnancy or if you have a heart condition. If an acupoint has a mole, varicose vein or break in the skin, pressure should not be applied. Consult with your GP and acupressurist about any medical problems or concerns you have as they are trained to recognise what can and cannot be treated with the therapy.