

Sports Medicine and Acupuncture

By Christina Crawford, LAc, Dipl.OM

Whether you are someone who enjoys regular exercise or if you are an athlete looking for a way to improve your performance and gain a competitive edge, acupuncture has several tools to help you. Using the guiding principles and treatment approaches of acupuncture and Oriental medicine, an athlete can strengthen their body function, restore physical balance and improve recovery after an injury. Many professional teams now have an acupuncturist on staff to keep their athletes at peak performance.

Sports related injuries are extremely common and unfortunately can set you back in your game. Even the most mindful athletes can find themselves with an overuse injury or acute sprain, strain, twist or tear. Those of you who rely on your sport for both physical and mental balance know how important it is to get back to it as soon as possible. Luckily, acupuncture and Oriental medicine will help you feel better!

Jogging, lifting weights, soccer, basketball, tennis, football and so on, all come with their own unique array of injuries. Runners often experience hip, knee or foot problems. Those who lift weights are susceptible to back and wrist injuries. Soccer and basketball athletes are prone to twists and sprains and most people are familiar with the term ‘tennis elbow’. Football players find themselves with a variety of injuries depending if their pain is caused by overuse, misuse or impact. Your acupuncturist can help you with the swelling of a sprained ankle, an injured muscle, ligament or bone, or help you to regain balance after a traumatic concussion. Broken bones heal more completely and more quickly with the use of Chinese medicine. Tendons and ligaments are more likely to regain their flexibility and strength. Having an acupuncturist on your team will get you back in the game sooner!

Commonly treated sports injuries include:

- Muscle strain
- Shoulder impingement
- Tennis elbow
- Runner’s knee
- Neck and back pain
- Spasms
- Ankle sprain
- Achilles tendonitis

Topical Applications

Recovery from trauma is a major component of Chinese medicine and there are several topical herbs that can be useful. In Chinese medicine, ice is not used for an injury. This is because ice restricts the flow of blood to the injured area and while it can temporarily alleviate discomfort, icing an injury can inhibit the body from fully healing. Instead of ice, acupuncturists use a topical herbal application known as “herbal ice” or San Huang San. These herbs are amazing for decreasing swelling and pain and speeding up the recovery process. There are many other herbal ointments, tinctures and patches that are specific to help stop pain and promote healing.

Heat Therapy

Some people experience an increase in pain when it is cold or damp outside. This is particularly common for areas of the body which have undergone a surgical procedure. The treatment approach is to apply warmth to the area to stop the pain. Your acupuncturist will use a TDP lamp which provides heat therapy at a deep level. The TDP lamp is a safe and effective method for encouraging the flow of blood to an area while invigorating the body’s own healing mechanisms. Another method of warming a painful injury is by using moxibustion. Moxibustion is an herb that stimulates healing and consists of the dried leaves of Ai Ye. It is burned at a safe distance from the painful body part and helps to restore proper circulation of blood and body fluids through the area.

Manual Therapies

Cupping, Guasha and Tuina are all manual therapies used in Chinese medicine. For cupping, glass cups are applied with suction on the skin to mobilize tissue which releases musculoskeletal tension in the fascia. Guasha is the use of a specific tool which is scraped across the skin using a lubricant; it improves circulation and helps to mobilize and break apart scar tissue or painful adhesions in the body tissue. Tuina is Chinese medical massage which alleviates painful areas of the musculoskeletal system. Each of these manual therapies work at the level of the fascia, muscles and joints to increase your chances for a full recovery, improve your range of motion and decrease pain. Acupuncture is also a manual therapy that physically releases areas of pain, promotes movement of blood and encourages healing. E-stim therapy, gentle electrical stimulation, is very effective when treating sports related injuries.

Qi Gong and Prevention

As most athletes know, proper posture and ergonomics are of paramount importance for injury prevention. Qi Gong and Tai Ji are coordinated, intentional, balanced and gentle movements that enhance, strengthen and harmonize all your muscle groups. Prevention is key! Acupuncture is not just for those moments when you find yourself in pain with an injury. Chinese medicine provides a comprehensive approach for injury prevention. With acupuncture, you can promote athletic performance by correcting postural imbalances, improving your range of motion and incorporating specialized techniques to strengthen areas more susceptible to injury. If you are looking for peak level performance, consider how acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine can enhance your game!

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Christina earned her Master of Science in Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine from the Finger Lakes School of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine of New York Chiropractic College.

Christina is board certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine and licensed by the state of New York. She is excited to share the benefits of acupuncture with others and will work closely with you and your existing medical team to ensure that you are receiving the best care for your wellness goals.