

Resolving Headaches and Migraines with Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine

By Christina Crawford LAc, Dipl. OM

Have you ever been afflicted with a debilitating migraine...or maybe you have that nagging headache that just won't go away, perhaps something in between. Whatever your head pain, you know that your day would be so much better without it! Traditional Chinese medicine will look to the cause of your head pain in an effort to eliminate or minimize their future return. Headaches can be due to a number of triggers including diet, posture, hormonal imbalance, and trauma. Your acupuncturist will work with you to determine where your headaches are coming from and will help balance your body to clear any blockages that may be the physiological cause of your pain.

When you come in for your first acupuncture treatment, you will be asked several questions about the nature, location and onset of your head pain. Your acupuncturist will want extensive details because in Chinese medicine, there are several different patterns for headaches, and for each pattern the treatment approach will vary. From this information, the recommendations and acupuncture will be specific to you, your body and how your pain presents.

Location of Pain

One question that your acupuncturist will ask is where exactly the pain located? The body has 12 primary pathways and several extraordinary pathways that in Chinese medicine are called meridians or channels. The location of your head pain will indicate which channel has a blockage.

Headaches that radiate to the neck and back of the head are known as a taiyang headache and can be associated with the onset of the common cold or musculoskeletal tension in the neck. When the headache is predominantly in the forehead it is a yangming headache and often occurs in people who have digestive complaints, especially constipation. Pain that is in the temples or on one side of the head is a shaoyang headache, while heavy pain is a taiyin headache, when the pain radiates to the brain and teeth it is a shaoyin headache, and a jueyin headache is characterized by pain in the top of the head which can radiate to the sides of the head. Each of these patterns have common accompanying symptoms and are associated with particular channels or meridians. Acupuncture, herbal medicine, dietary changes and qi gong can then be incorporated to clear this specific blockage.

Nature of Pain

Your acupuncturist will ask you questions about the nature and the quality of the pain. They will want to know if the pain comes on slowly or all of a sudden, if it lasts a long time or is fairly brief. Is the pain heavy, stabbing or indistinct? These answers will help determine if the treatment should focus on clearing pathologies such as dampness, stasis or stagnation. With

severe and sudden onset of pain (known as a thunderclap headache), it is recommended to seek emergency medical care to rule out a more serious cause.

Triggers

What causes your headache or migraine? Have you noticed that they occur more often if you are exhausted or stressed? What about bright light or staring at your computer? Do certain foods such as caffeine or chocolate seem to bring on head pain? Do you wake up with them or do they occur at the end of the day? For women, are headaches worse during, after or before menstruation? Knowing what triggers your head pain is extremely important. A headache that began following some type of concussion or trauma will be treated differently than one that is associated with a particular food, or began after giving birth. Sometimes something as simple as eliminating an allergen will stop recurrence. Keeping a detailed diary can be very helpful to find out what is causing your headache.

How You Can Help Ensure Success

If you are not sure of what triggers your head pain, the first step is to create a headache diary. This should include details for each headache such as date, time of day, what you were doing when it started (and right before), foods consumed that day, emotions, energy level, what the pain felt like, where the headache was located on your head and any other associated symptoms. The more detailed and accurate this information, the better the chances to correct the problem. Once the pattern of your pain has been identified, there may be some necessary life changes to ensure your body restores balance.

Computers and Phones

If you realize that you get a headache after a long day of staring at a computer screen, or typing, your acupuncturist may recommend that several times per hour you stand up, and look away from the screen. You may also be given some exercises to help correct posture that is common with computer work or phone usage. Sometimes the resolution of head pain comes with the realization that you need glasses or a change in your current prescription.

Women's Health

It is common for headaches to be associated with menstrual imbalances. If this is the case with your head pain, in addition to acupuncture, you may benefit from herbal medicine to help balance and regulate your cycle. Acupuncture has a very positive reputation for resolving issues related to women's health.

Food Sensitivities

Headaches due to food sensitivities, digestive irregularities and blood sugar imbalances are common. Your attention to how various foods impact your body is helpful. A diet log should be kept for at least 5 days per week and record everything that you consume, including condiments, beverages and snacks. Be sure to include a section about how you felt during and after the meal and the nature of your bowel movements. For success, it is important to follow recommendations

provided by your acupuncturist. Suggestions may include eliminating trigger foods, or adding new foods that will create a happier gut.

Trauma, Injury or Degeneration

Trauma, whiplash, concussions, spinal conditions, muscular tension and other physical causes are also reasons that you may be having headaches or migraines. In Chinese medicine, there is a saying that where there is free flow, there is no pain and where there is no free flow, there is pain. Trauma creates stasis and blockage, which cause pain. Acupuncture aims to restore free flow and decrease or eliminate pain. Your acupuncturist may give you qi gong exercises that will help restore movement to the area of restriction. Cupping and tuina (Chinese medical massage) are commonly used for headaches that are associated with musculoskeletal conditions.

Stress and Emotions

If your headaches or migraines are related to an emotional response, there are many things that you can do to help. Acupuncture can encourage emotional balance, while you practice creating healthy thought processes and reactions to external stimuli. Just like a headache, there are many patterns of emotional health. This is why understanding you as a whole person is important for your acupuncturist. Recommendations for someone suffering from headaches and depression will be different from someone who gets a migraine when they become angry or upset.

Sleep Patterns

Lack of healthy sleep, or excessive amounts of sleep can also relate to head pain. Your acupuncturist can help you instill good habits such as avoiding illuminated screens and beverages for one hour before bed, always getting in bed at the same time each evening and creating a nightly routine in preparation for sleep. Herbal medicine, qi gong exercises and meditations can also be very helpful tools in creating balanced sleep habits. It can be helpful to consider the quality of your pillow, your mattress and the positions in which you sleep since poor bedding support and abnormal ways in which you hold your body while sleeping can both be aggravating factors.

Holistic Approach

Because Chinese medicine treats the whole person, instead of just the presenting symptom, it is important to provide your acupuncturist with detailed information about your entire body. Even if it may not seem related, these details are relevant to your headache and successfully eliminating it. If you tend to be hot or cold or if you sweat in an abnormal manner give clues as to your overall health. When filling out your medical intake forms, giving your acupuncturist accurate and complete details will benefit your treatment immensely!

Light at the End of the Tunnel

With your active participation in a treatment plan tailored specifically to address the nature of your headache or migraine, you may find relief and the ability to resume the activities in life that you are currently missing out on. When you are ready, your acupuncturist will be there, working with you in an effort to help you find pain free living!

Originally Published in the Holistic Resource

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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.