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Acupuncture for Headaches

by Eunice Kan, L.Ac.

If you suffer from frequent headaches,
consider the holistic approach of Traditional
Chinese Medicine



Headaches are probably the most common type of pain that people experience on a daily basis. More than 45 million Americans suffer from headaches and migraines, which turns out to be one out of every six Americans.

A survey conducted in November 2007 by the National Headache Foundation found that 94% of headache sufferers have skipped a family or social event and 87% of respondents admitted missing a day of work due to suffering from a headache.

For thousands of years, acupuncture and herbal medicine have been used to relieve headaches and migraines, as well as treat their underlying causes. Acupuncture and herbal medicine can offer powerful and immediate relief without the side effects that prescription and over-the-counter drugs can cause, such as dizziness, nausea, irregular heart rate, or digestive issues.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a comprehensive and preventative medical system. It differs from the conventional Western medicine in diagnosis and treatment of headaches by recognizing specific symptoms and signs that are unique to each individual. TCM uses a variety of techniques including acupuncture, herbal medicine, bodywork/massage, diet and lifestyle counseling, and energetic exercises to restore imbalances found in the body.

What makes TCM unique is how the differentiation of diagnosis directly affects the treatment. When looking to treat headaches, we look at the following factors to differentiate: location of pain; severity of pain; quality of pain; duration and course of pain; accompanying symptoms and signs; and exacerbating and relieving factors.

Location of pain: The location of pain indicates the meridians and organs that may be involved. In acupuncture, the body is mapped out in different meridians that connect the surface of the body to internal organs as well as to different parts of the body. Via the meridians, our whole body connects to and affects each and every part. Whether your headache is located on the top, temple, the front or back of your head can differentiate which meridian or organ is out of balance and causing your headache.

Severity of pain: How bad is your pain from scale of one to ten? Is it worse during certain times of the day than others? Does it get worse with weather changes?

Quality of pain: Is the headache sharp or stabbing, cold, dull or heavy? Does it move from one place to another, or bind to one area?

Duration and course of pain: how long and how often does the headache occur? The more frequent occurrence or longer the duration, the more treatments or time it will take to relieve the pain and treat the underlying cause.

Accompanying symptoms and signs: What other symptoms do you experience with your headache? For example, do you have dizziness, nausea, vomiting, or fatigue before, during or after your headache? Does the headache occur prior to or during your period? Also, any psychological issues, depression or anxiety is very important in TCM since a person's emotional state is a huge part of pain and physical trauma.

Exacerbating and relieving factors: What makes the headache better or worse? This is important to know.

Efficacy and adverse effects of drugs: A TCM practitioner will ask what treatment has worked or not worked, and if you are on any medication currently. A physical examination, appropriate laboratory tests, and x-ray must be performed to rule out any brain or head condition.

The TCM practitioner will try to determine whether the headache is due to external or internal factors. Do you get headaches when you step outside in windy, cold, or hot weather? Do you get headaches when you get angry or emotional? By finding out this detailed information, the practitioner is able to treat you with specific acupuncture points and herbal formulas according to your individual diagnosis.

Helpful Tips to Avoid Your Next Headache

- * Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes, soda, sweets, etc.
- * Get enough sleep.
- * Eat regular meals.
- * Get regular exercise.
- * Take deep breaths and try to relax your body.
- * Qigong exercises or yoga are a couple of great methods to learn to breath correctly. The brain needs appropriate and regular flow of blood and oxygen to function.
- * Try Acupressure.
- * Large Intestine 4 is a good acupressure point when you get an acute headache. It is located on the dorsal part of the hand on the meaty part, between the thumb and forefinger.
- * Experiment with white flower oil. Try putting white flower oil on the local area where you are having the headache. (You can find it in Chinese markets and herb stores.)

If headaches affect your quality of life on a regular basis, it is perhaps time to seek professional advice and take the step to take care of yourself. Consider consulting with a licensed acupuncturist to stop the pain and balance your body from your everyday stress and toxins.

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