

The Broker's Guide to Acupuncturists and Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Acupuncture is the insertion of thin, metal needles into the body to stimulate meridians in specific locations. These stimulation points are called acupoints or acupuncture points.

According to Chinese medical tradition, the human body has 365 acupuncture points running along 20 meridians. In these acupuncture points, the needles are usually manipulated for 15 to 30 minutes and then retained for 30 to 60 minutes. This helps to restore health to the mind and body by regulating qi flow throughout the body and balancing yin and yang.

Despite its popularity, acupuncture and TCM remain controversial in a society heavily influenced by Western ideas. Many patients seeking alternative therapies do not understand TCM, which could lead to unfortunate outcomes, such as worsened symptoms or litigation against the practitioner.

What is Acupuncture and TCM?

Acupuncture in TCM

Acupuncture has been a part of Chinese health care for at least 2,500 years. Based on the premise that patterns of energy flow through the body, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a form of energy therapy. Acupuncture practitioners within TCM argue that disruption of the energy flow negatively impacts health. Acupuncture involves stimulating various anatomical points on the body with hair-thin needles. (1)

Hand-held strokes are used to insert the needles, or electrical stimulation, also known as electroacupuncture, is also used.

What is Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)?

It has a history of over two thousand years and its origins can be traced back to ancient China. The mechanism by which Chinese medicine balances the functions of the body is based on the theories of Yin and Yang and Wu Xing, which are influenced by ancient Chinese philosophy, culture, science and technology.

Who Can Practice TCM?

In Canada, acupuncturists must be trained and educated in accordance with national and provincial regulations. In Ontario, for instance, those registered with the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists of Ontario are the only ones allowed to:

- Use the protected title(s) of “Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioner” and/or “Acupuncturist”, and the designation(s) of “R. TCMP” and/or “R. Ac”
- Perform acupuncture on tissue beneath the dermis and beneath the mucous membranes
- Use TCM techniques to diagnose a body system disorder as the cause of a person’s symptoms

Regulations in Canada: Key Findings

Some provinces do not regulate acupuncturists

Approximately half of the Canadian provinces require health practitioners to be trained in acupuncture in order to use it as a complement to their own professional training. Each health profession sets its own training standards. However, not all provinces have set standards. Acupuncture Canada's ACC or CAFCI designations are accepted in all Canadian provinces that have established standards for acupuncture.

Acupuncturists may be interdisciplinary

In all Canadian provinces and territories, acupuncture can be used by medical doctors and dentists. All provinces except Quebec allow physiotherapists to use acupuncture. Moreover, Quebec and British Columbia are the only provinces where chiropractors cannot use acupuncture.

Acupuncture can be used by Naturopathic Doctors in provinces where they are regulated, within their scope of practice. The use of acupuncture by massage therapists is permitted in the provinces where they are licensed, except in British Columbia. Before acupuncture can be used as an adjunct therapy, it must be part of the scope of practice of the professional.

Patients choosing an unregulated acupuncturist must educate themselves

The practice of traditional acupuncture is regulated in British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Ontario and Newfoundland. "Acupuncturist" is a protected title in those provinces. The responsibility for seeking out information about a practitioner's training level falls on consumers in provinces without regulation. (2)

Exposures for Acupuncturists

In Western medicine, scientists are still unsure of exactly how acupuncture works, and therefore, it is still controversial. For this reason, acupuncture should be used with caution to avoid negative outcomes.

Acupuncture is not for everyone:

Patients should inform their doctors of all treatments and medications (dietary supplements, prescriptions, and over-the-counters) they are taking. Any patient who has a pacemaker, has an infection risk, has skin problems, is pregnant, has breast implants, or is at risk for infection should inform their doctor. In the event that these matters are not discussed, acupuncture may pose a health risk to the patient.

Disease diagnosis:

A patient should not depend on an acupuncturist's diagnosis. If a doctor has diagnosed a patient, the patient should consult that doctor about whether acupuncture might help.

Side effects:

Although acupuncture has many health benefits, it can also have negative side effects. Insomnia is one of the most common. However, acupuncture treatment has also been known to improve the quality of sleep. Other rare but possible negative side effects include:

- Worse symptoms
- Fatigue
- Soreness
- Bruising
- Muscle twitching
- Lightheadedness

The MedThree Advantage

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1. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/82-003-x/2001001/article/6021-eng.pdf?st=pJIRQ151>
2. <https://www.acupuncturecanada.org/acupuncture-101/regulation-and-education/>