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A Consumer's Guide to Acupuncture and Asian Medicine

What is Acupuncture and Asian Medicine?

The theory and practice of acupuncture is based on traditional Asian medicine, a natural and holistic health care system that has been practiced for thousands of years in many Asian countries. It is used to promote balance and wellness, identify the root cause of illness, and support both the treatment and prevention of health conditions. Acupuncture is one of the main modalities used in traditional Asian medicine to address these imbalances and conditions and is the name the state of California uses to address the general practice of traditional Asian Medicine.

The general theory of acupuncture is that good health depends on the smooth flow of Qi (pronounced "chee"), which is the body's vital energy. According to acupuncture theory, Qi flows through a network of pathways called channels or meridians, which connect different organs and systems throughout the body. When Qi flows smoothly, the body stays balanced and healthy; when the flow is disrupted, illness or discomfort can occur.

Acupuncture works by stimulating specific points on the body called "acu-points", to restore the natural flow of Qi and support the body's healing processes. This traditionally is done with very fine, sterile needles. In some cases, other techniques such as, heat(moxibustion), pressure(acupressure), or massage is used instead of needles.

California acupuncturists are trained in, and utilize additional modalities besides needling to provide care, including herbal, nutritional, and exercise therapies. The acupuncturist uses a system of diagnostic methods that take into consideration the person as a whole, discerning the body's pattern of disharmony rather than isolated symptoms. The aim is not only to eliminate or alleviate symptoms, but more importantly to treat the underlying cause, increase the body's ability to function, and improve the quality of life.

Acupuncture (and Asian medicine) is one of the newest primary health care professions in California. The potential benefits of acupuncture are widely recognized, and it is steadily being integrated within mainstream health care. Many Americans have tried and started to use acupuncture and Asian medicine since it was introduced to the American public in the 1970s. Acupuncturists are trained to treat a

variety of conditions. Many people see acupuncturists to help address chronic and acute pain conditions. Others, use acupuncture to address conditions other than pain, including, but not limited to:

- allergies/asthma
- anxiety/depression
- arthritis/joint problems
- bladder/kidney problems
- dizziness
- drug/alcohol/smoking addiction
- fatigue
- gastrointestinal disorders and conditions
- gynecological disorders and conditions
- headache/migraine
- immune system disorders and conditions
- musculoskeletal injuries
- paralysis/numbness
- sexual dysfunction
- side effects of chemotherapy
- stress/tension
- stroke rehabilitation

You should speak with your acupuncturist and doctor to determine if acupuncture may be helpful for you.

When Seeking Acupuncture Treatment

Choosing an Acupuncturist

The Board does not provide recommendations or referrals to acupuncturists. To find a reputable acupuncturist, ask your doctor, friends, family, or your health insurance plan for suggestions. You can also check with acupuncture professional associations for their recommendation of practitioners in your area. A list of Acupuncture Professional Associations can be found on the Board's website at www.acupuncture.ca.gov.

Verifying a License

Once you have found potential acupuncturists, it is important to verify the status of their license. This is done using the Board's license lookup feature found on our website's main page. Click on "Verify a License" and input their name or license number to be provided the most current information on the status of their license and the location of registered places of practice. Verifying a license will provide you current information on if their license is clear to practice and, if they have been disciplined, information on their discipline.

Once you have confirmed their status, call their offices and ask questions that address your goals. You may also consider asking about:

- their training and years of experience,
- their approach to acupuncture and Asian medicine,
- any specialties they may have,
- their experience in treating your ailment,
- treatment costs, and,
- if they take any insurance.

What You Should Expect to See in the Clinic

A licensed acupuncture clinic should meet the same basic health and cleanliness standards expected of any medical setting:

- Clean, professional treatment environment
- Sterile, single-use needles only
- Sharps containers for proper needle disposal
- Sanitized treatment tables and linens
- Handwashing facilities or sanitizer readily available
- Privacy and professionalism during treatment

Moreover, acupuncturists are required to post two disclosures in a conspicuous location in their clinic:

- 1) their Place of Practice license, which communicates to the consumer that their clinic has been registered with the Board, and,
- 2) the Notice to Consumers, that identifies acupuncture as a profession regulated by the State of California and how consumers can contact the Board.

If you notice unclean conditions or feel unsafe during your visit, you may report it to the Board (see, "How are Complaints Filed")

As a Patient, You May:

- Request and receive information about the practitioner's professional capabilities, including licensure, education, training, experience, professional association membership, specialization, and limitations.
- Be treated with dignity and respect.
- Have access to a safe environment, free from sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.
- Ask questions about your treatment or other services from your provider.
- Decline to answer any question or disclose any information you choose not to reveal.
- Request and receive information from the practitioner about your progress toward your treatment goals.

- Decline a particular type of treatment, or end treatment without obligation or harassment.
- Refuse electronic recording.
- Request and (in most cases) receive a summary of your records, including the diagnosis, your progress, and the type of treatment.
- Seek a second opinion at any time about your treatment or your practitioner's methods.
- Report unethical and illegal behavior by a practitioner (see, "How are Complaints Filed").
- Receive a copy of your records or have a copy of your records transferred to any practitioner or agency you choose.

During an Acupuncture Treatment...

- Your first visit will typically include a health history review and discussion of your symptoms.
- The Acupuncturists may conduct diagnostic exams.
- The acupuncturist will explain your diagnosed condition, the proposed treatment plan, length of care, review costs and payment options, and obtain your informed consent before beginning.
- Thin, sterile, single-use needles will be gently inserted at precise points. You may feel a tingling or mild sensation.
- Sessions typically last 30–60 minutes.
- You may be advised on diet, herbs, exercise, or lifestyle changes as part of your care plan.

Understanding the Treatment Process

Diagnosis

An acupuncturist's diagnosis is determined in part by using methods similar to other health care practitioners: asking patients for a thorough history of their health, diet, exercise patterns, and chief complaints; performing a physical exam, ordering laboratory tests, X-rays or MRIs, and making a referral to a specialist, if necessary. The acupuncturist also uses unique diagnostic techniques, for example, taking the patient's pulse on both wrists and observing the tongue, eyes, and/or complexion. Following the diagnosis, the practitioner should explain to you the nature of your problem, recommend a treatment plan, and give you an anticipated prognosis (outcome).

Treatment Procedures

Acupuncture needles are stainless steel, ultra-fine, quite flexible, and can be as small as one-quarter inch or greater than three inches long. They are pre-sterilized, non-toxic, and disposable (single-use). Acupuncture needles are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration as a type II medical devices whose sales are restricted to qualified practitioners of acupuncture as determined by the states or jurisdiction. The sensation you feel depends on the location (for example hands and feet tend to be more sensitive than on the back), the condition being treated, and the acupuncturist's technique. Needles are typically placed in several acu-points and are usually left in about 20 to 40 minutes. Stimulation can be done by rotating the needles manually or attaching electrodes to send a weak electric current through the needles (called electroacupuncture).

Your treatment may also include additional techniques, such as: moxibustion (using heat from burning herbs on or near the acu-points), cupping (using suction to improve circulation), auricular therapy (acupuncture on the ears), *Tui Na* (a type of Asian massage), and acupressure (applying pressure instead of needles).

Always feel free to ask questions about your treatment, progress, and options. If your response to treatment is not satisfactory, consult your practitioner as they will consider further diagnostic exams, modify the treatment plan, or refer to an appropriate practitioner, if necessary.

Treatment Precautions

Having an acupuncture treatment if you are very hungry or tired is not recommended.

Occasionally, some bruising may occur after treatment. If you have a bleeding disorder or are on blood thinning medications, you should inform your acupuncturist, who may recommend a new approach, additional tests, or refer you to another acupuncturist or health professional as needed.

Herbal Therapy

In California, acupuncturists are licensed health care professionals who are trained and tested in herbal medicine.

As part of your treatment, a licensed acupuncturist may recommend herbal remedies. These formulas are designed to support the body's natural healing process and may be used to address a wide range of symptoms. Herbs can be given in different forms, such as raw, pills, capsules, powders (granules), or liquid extracts (tinctures), depending on what's most appropriate and easiest for you to take.

Most herbs, with a few exceptions, are regulated as supplements. This means the United States Food and Drug Administration, commonly known as FDA, does not evaluate them for safety, effectiveness, or specific health claims before they are sold.

There may be risks related to safety, quality, dosage, or potential side effects, especially with products that vary in strength or are not clearly labeled. Some herbs may also interact with medications or other supplements you're already taking.

The Board strongly recommends consulting a licensed acupuncturist and your primary care provider before beginning any herbal therapy. It is also very important to inform both your physician and acupuncturist about everything you are currently taking, including prescription drugs, herbs, and other supplements, so they can ensure safe and effective treatment. If you are on prescription medication, it is important to inform your acupuncturist as they are trained to evaluate for any herb-drug interactions that may pose a problem.

If you have an allergic reaction or unusual symptoms from any herbal product, let your acupuncturist and doctor know right away.

Acupuncturists are trained to identify conditions that may require referral to a specialist, so it is important for you to provide detailed information about your condition so that important medical problems are not overlooked.

What About Insurance Coverage?

Some California insurance plans include acupuncture treatment in their policies. Ask your insurer about coverage. Some acupuncturists are providers for traditional PPO and HMO plans. Acupuncturists are currently covered under California State Medi-Cal and Worker's Compensation (Note: Subsequent laws passed by the California Legislature may affect this coverage.).

The Board does not have jurisdiction over health insurance other than documented fraudulent actions. Insurance complaints can be submitted to the California Department of Insurance.

How Are Complaints Filed?

A complaint should be filed by anyone who believes that a licensed acupuncturist engaged in illegal or unethical activities related to their professional responsibilities. Complaints can also be filed on individuals who are not licensed but still practice acupuncture. A simple way to ensure your practitioner is licensed is to use the Verify a License feature on the Board's website.

Anyone may submit a complaint to the Board either online at www.acupuncture.ca.gov or by postal mail. While complaints can be submitted anonymously, providing your contact information and detailed facts about the experience in question helps the Board better review and investigate the matter.

California Acupuncture Board

The California Acupuncture Board licenses and regulates the acupuncture profession according to the Acupuncture Licensure Act, which identifies acupuncture as a primary health care profession. The Board, in enforcing its Laws and Regulations, works to ensure that practitioners meet professional standards and that consumers receive safe, informed, and ethical care. The primary responsibility of the Board is to protect consumers from incompetent, unprofessional, and fraudulent practitioners.

The Board establishes standards for the approval of educational programs, oversees the development and administration of the licensing examination, issues new and renewal licenses, approves continuing education, and enforces the standards by investigating complaints when received. The Board strives to promote safe practice through the improvement of educational training standards.

To verify an acupuncturist's license or learn more about the Boards' role in regulating the profession, visit www.acupuncture.ca.gov.

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