

Question: How does Acupuncture Work?

Answer: Western researchers frequently answer this question rather matter-of-factly. We know, for example, that inserting needles at certain points in the skin results in the release of endorphins and enkephalins from the brain. According to the Merriam Webster Medline Plus Medical Dictionary, an enkephalin occurs naturally in the brain and has opiate and analgesic properties. Similarly, according to the same source, endorphins also bind to opiate receptors in the brain, and produce analgesic effects. This helps to explain Acupuncture's consistently positive effect on pain relief, and also helps to explain to a certain extent the pleasant feeling that generally follows an Acupuncture treatment. But it doesn't really explain how Acupuncture works. In fact, isn't this a little like saying that aspirin works to relieve pain by lessening discomfort? It is a tautological argument, dressed up in fancy Western medical terms. Why does Acupuncture cause these changes to take place in the brain? The truth of the matter is that Western medicine does not really know how Acupuncture works. And for that reason, many conventional Western medical practitioners don't know what to think of Acupuncture.

But look up any number of different commonly prescribed medicines, including acetaminophen and cortisone, and you'll frequently find that the exact mechanism of action for these medications is UNKNOWN! And yet, they're prescribed all the time. I'm constantly amazed that one of the arguments that Western medicine makes against Eastern Medicine is that we cannot show HOW it works. Yet practitioners of Western Medicine willingly prescribe drugs every day without having any idea how they work. Let's face it - legitimate scientific research must pass only a few tests. First of all, results must be repeatable, preferably by different researchers. Second, the preponderance of evidence must point in the same direction, either supporting or refuting a hypothesis. Finally, there should be some mechanism that supports the objective interpretation of the findings of an experiment. In other words, there should be some way to eliminate, or at least reduce, the influence of a preconceived notion on the outcome. In the framework we're discussing, a placebo might be used to test a drug, and neither the researchers evaluating the results nor the patients would know whether a placebo or a real drug was being used, until the experiment had ended. In Acupuncture, we commonly use "sham Acupuncture," the random placement of needles to simulate essentially a placebo treatment, and compare that to a true Acupuncture treatment.

Acupuncture has consistently been shown to work for a wide variety of ailments. The Chinese explain the effects by saying that the insertion of a needle at a specific point alters the flow of Qi, or energy, in that channel. By using specific points and needling techniques, we can alter the way in which the Qi moves. We can demonstrate this repeatedly and consistently, supporting the principles of Chinese Medicine. It's time for Western Medicine to stop applying a different principle to others than it applies to itself.

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