

# TCM: Treatment and Diagnostic Methods in Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Acupuncture can be used to treat various symptoms. Photo by kphunter

What distinguishes TCM, or Traditional Chinese Medicine, from other medical systems such as the Western medical establishment? Diagnosis in TCM is done by the careful measurement of the patient's various pulses, observation of his or her general demeanor, observation of the tongue, and asking questions. This process is called "pattern recognition" or "pattern discrimination," and it is used by the TCM practitioner to ascertain the nature of the problem and determine a treatment strategy. Once a diagnosis is made, the medical practitioner creates a unique treatment program based on the specific needs of the patient.

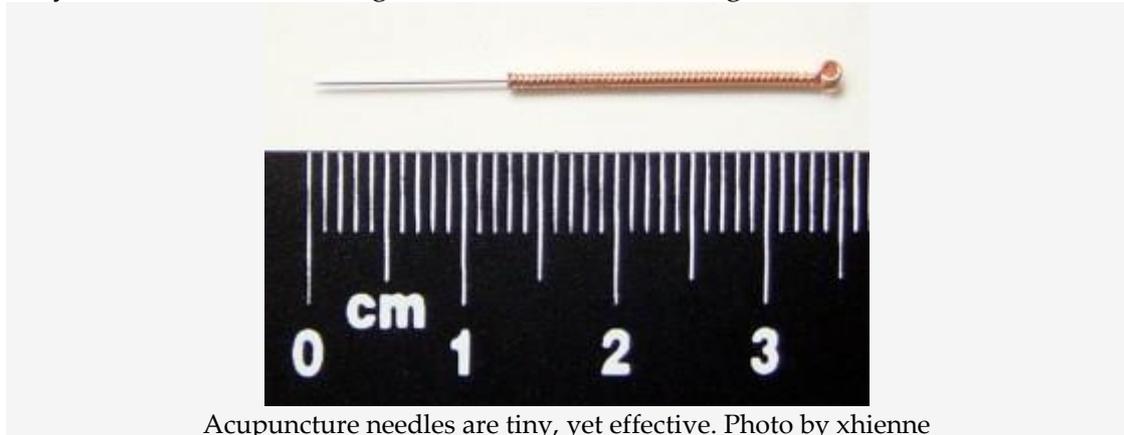
## **Traditional Chinese Medicine: The Critical Difference**

The single most important aspect of TCM that distinguishes it from Western medicine is the fact that treatment is based on the patient's individual combination of patterns, no matter what his or her disease may be. This carries a significant advantage: in contrast to Western medicine, TCM is almost entirely free of side effects because it is based on the individual patient's unique patterns. The two most frequently used methods of treatment in TCM are acupuncture and herbal medicines, and most often they are used in combination.

## **Acupuncture in Alternative Medicine**

Acupuncture involves the use of tiny, delicate Chinese needles, placed at specific points along the body, called "meridians." A treatment may use anywhere from a few needles to several dozen at a time. The needles are inserted (usually painlessly) and must remain in the skin for 15 – 45 minutes, depending upon the individual needs of the patient. During this time, many TCM practitioners

position their patients comfortably on a treatment table or in a chair, where they may relax or doze, listening to soft music in the background.



Acupuncture needles are tiny, yet effective. Photo by xhienne

The needles used in TCM are so different from the needles used in Western medical practice that the word “needle” is practically a misnomer. Chinese needles are short, thin, and flexible rather than long, thick, and stiff, and come in various sizes. In China, thicker needles are used, while in the West, the needles usually used are thinner and more flexible.

In any case, the acupuncture needles are consistently tiny in diameter, measuring a few thousandths of an inch (approximately 0.16 millimeters). Acupuncture needles are a few centimeters in length (roughly an inch or two); cause a feeling like a slight pin-prick when inserted, and within moments, the patient ceases to feel them altogether. What the patient does feel is a tingling sensation at the point of entry, as the needles increase the flow of energy from one place to another throughout the body. Thus, the subjective feeling is that of a slight buzz, which can actually be very pleasant for some patients.



Traditional Chinese Medicine uses many herbal products. Photo by mailer\_diablo

## **Herbal Medicines**

While acupuncture is most closely associated with Chinese Medicine in many people's minds, the most common and most potent TCM therapy is the use of medicinal herbs, mixed into boiling water and drunk like tea. Chinese medicines are usually a mixture of several herbs; each formula tailor-made for the specific needs of the patient, based on his or her individual requirements. The amount of each ingredient, as well as the specific herbs used in the mixture, may change from one treatment to another, according to the changes in the patient's condition.

## **Alternative Treatment Methods**

Several additional treatment methods are often used in conjunction with acupuncture and herbal medicines.

- **Diet:** This is considered one of the most useful therapies in Chinese medicine. Interestingly, Western medicine and TCM share the view that a carefully controlled diet plan is essential to the treatment of many illnesses – for example, diabetes and heart disease. And, while the actual diet plans differ from one another in Western medicine and TCM, both medical systems stress the importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables.
- **Moxibustion:** The “moxa” is a stick of compressed herbs that is held several inches away from the skin, and used to heat a specific body area. Moxa burns at a high temperature, and offers localized pain relief much like that of a heating pad or hot water bottle.
- **“Talking”:** TCM does not distinguish between the body and the mind; the concept of the “bodymind” is central to TCM. One basic principle is that every thought and emotion is actually a collection of physical sensations which we give an abstract label, like “anger” or “love.” Thus, TCM practitioners sometimes use “*xin li liao fa*,” which is a psychological treatment method similar to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in Western psychiatry.

## **A Gentle Way to Better Health**

Generally speaking, a therapy session with a TCM practitioner is a relaxing experience, as the traditions of Chinese medical practitioners stress the importance of emphatic listening and spending time with each patient. Thus, a TCM appointment may last from an hour to an hour and a half. In addition, traditional Chinese medical treatment is so gentle that it is used to help infants overcome colic and to treat their ear infections. Geriatric patients can also enjoy the benefits of traditional medicine, particularly for the relief of the aches and pains that often accompany the aging process. In short, TCM can be appropriate for treating a wide range of illnesses in every age group.

## **Resources**

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