Asthma

Summary Sheet Evidence-Based Assessment of Acupuncture Series

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Asthma Overview

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disorder of the airways associated with recurrent episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness, and coughing.1 Although some causes of asthma are well understood, challenges remain to understand this complex disease.^{2,3} Two categories of factors are known to be influential in the development of asthma: 1) those that lead to the disease (e.g. genetics, obesity, and gender), and 2) those that flare symptoms (e.g. allergens, diet, and tobacco smoke).1,4

Despite current advances in treatment, the worldwide prevalence of asthma is on the rise; current estimates suggest ~300 million individuals are affected.¹ A survey of asthma patients indicated 15% of respondents used alternative therapies and over half reported benefits.⁵ A recent Canadian survey found that ~15% of individuals with asthma sought treatment with CAM.6 Of these modalities, acupuncture was the second most utilized with herbal medicine ranking fourth. These findings are in-line with the Global Initiative for Asthma, which recently called for a focus on innovative approaches to deliver optimal care.

"Where there is free flow there is no pain, where there is pain there is no free flow."

Asthma in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

TCM practitioners view the body in terms of Qi-dynamics and use unique and specific terminology. This is best summarized by the axiom "one pattern many diseases, one disease many patterns;" suggesting that identification of the correct pattern (e.g., Kidney qi deficiency) leads to improved patient care through the selection of pattern-specific acupuncture points.

In the case of asthma, the TCM practitioner will differentiate the condition as either primarily excess (active) or deficient (between attacks). Treatment during an attack focuses on identifying the acute flare-up or the 'excess pattern' invading the Lung system. The phase between attacks is focused on identifying the deficiency condition and the associated organ systems, often the Lung & Kidney systems.

Generally speaking, patients can expect acupuncture performed both on the front and back of the body, with the goal of opening the meridians to restore balanced breathing.⁷ In addition to acupuncture, treatments may also include the use of thermal stimulation (moxa), Chinese herbs, and lifestyle recommendations.



Findings from the **Acupuncture Research**

Based on the evidence. acupuncture is promising for the treatment of asthma: additional research is needed.



- The most recent systematic review concluded: "there is not enough evidence to make recommendations...[on the] value of acupuncture for asthma."8
- The publication of well-designed clinical trials is limited.
 - o Most trials are small studies, and each use varying protocols.
 - o Some clinical trials suggest benefit of acupuncture when used in addition to usual medical care.9-11

Summary and Commentary

Asthma is generally considered a chronic inflammatory disorder of the airways that leads to recurrent episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, and coughing.¹ Its incidence is on the rise, especially in children.^{1,12} Although improvements in understanding and treatment have occurred, the overall reduction of asthma & associated symptoms remains challenging. 1,13 Indeed, current guidelines call for "every effort...to continuously examine new and innovative approaches...of the best asthma care."1 Acupuncture use is on the rise in the U.S. and may be a beneficial treatment option.¹⁴ The current research studies suggest promise, however the evidence is limited, and additional research is needed. In clinical practice it is common to receive herbal medicine in addition to acupuncture for asthma treatment, yet no research has been performed on these combined modalities.

Scope and Purpose of Evidence-Based Assessment of Acupuncture Project

This project is supported by the Society for Acupuncture Research. It includes a growing library of condition specific assessments and summary sheets on topics such as dysmenorrhea, low back pain, neck pain, etc. Our aim is to evaluate the literature with a focus on systematic reviews and randomized controlled trials. When appropriate, other levels of evidence (e.g. case studies) are also referenced. The goal of the project is to inform policy-makers, clinicians, and the public of trends in the acupuncture literature and to provide expert commentary on the state of this evidence.

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