

# NOD TO AN ANCIENT ART

## *The FDA has OK'd acupuncture needles--and they could help you*

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Western medicine just leaned to the East. In a tentative bow to centuries of Chinese teachings, the Food and Drug Administration has decreed that acupuncture needles are as respectable a medical tool as a syringe or a scalpel. The March ruling stopped short of suggesting that acupuncture works for specific ailments; FDA officials said they needed more proof. But that may come soon. As research proceeds at many U.S. medical centers, the evidence is piling up that people with a variety of problems--from asthma and arthritis to migraines and strokes--can truly be helped by the ancient healing art.

For now, patients who find acupuncture beneficial will be left to wonder why. Most mainstream researchers in Western countries roll their eyes at the traditional Chinese belief that manipulating needles at certain points on the body stimulates the flow of Qi ("chee"), or natural healing energy. Many believe instead that the answer lies in the placebo response. You expect to feel better, so you do. But Bruce Pomeranz, a neurophysiologist at the University of Toronto who has spent 20 years studying acupuncture, is convinced he has found a rational explanation of the mechanism at work (Page 80). "There is overwhelming evidence from animal studies that acupuncture reduces pain by triggering the release of endorphins [natural morphinelike chemicals] and other substances by the nervous system," he says. According to Pomeranz's "neural theory," acupuncture also stimulates the nervous system to release ACTH (for adrenocorticotrophic hormone), a chemical that aids in fighting inflammation; prostaglandins, which are thought to help wounds heal faster; and other substances that may promote nerve regeneration.

**No side effects.** Science or art, acupuncture relieved Clevelander Michele Schmidt's pain. When migraines struck with a vengeance early in her pregnancy, Schmidt, 30, couldn't take her usual medication for fear of side effects. So she turned to acupuncturists at the prestigious Cleveland Clinic. "During the third treatment, I could actually feel the endorphins kicking in, bringing peace," she says. Schmidt's migraines are gone, but if they return she plans to stick with acupuncture even after her child is born rather than go back to her migraine medicine. Indeed, Austrian researchers have observed dramatic improvement in chronic migraine sufferers who have gone under the needle for regular preventive treatments. Last fall, in the scholarly journal *Headache*, the researchers noted that 18 of 26 patients reported a third fewer painful attacks after needle treatments; for 15, the improvement lasted three years. It may be the cocktail of pain-killing endorphins and anti-inflammatory substances that explains why some patients with arthritis find relief. In last June's issue of the journal *Osteoarthritis and Cartilage*, doctors at the University of Maryland School of Medicine reported that 12 patients with painful and inflamed osteoarthritic knees improved after acupuncture; now, a larger study comparing acupuncture with standard arthritis medications is underway. If acupuncture does indeed combat inflammation, asthmatics, too, may have good reason to seek the treatment. Linda Stalvey, of Fairfax, Va., figured she had nothing to lose after an asthma attack landed her in the emergency room. Her acupuncturist placed needles in her earlobes, nose, hands and ankles. "I felt an energy shift," she says. "It's keeping me comfortable even during allergy season." Stalvey says quarterly treatments have allowed her to cut down on her asthma medication. <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/graphics/x82001.htm>

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**Weapon against stroke?** The research is still scanty, but many scientists now think even stroke patients might benefit. So far, the only hard evidence of nerve regeneration by acupuncture has been seen in animals, but a recent study in *Neurology* showed provocative results with people. Swedish researchers looked at 78 stroke patients with paralysis, all of whom received physical therapy and half of whom also received acupuncture treatments twice a week for 10 weeks. A year after their therapy ended, the acupuncture patients scored significantly higher on tests measuring such things as balance, mobility and quality of life.

More than 12 million Americans have already turned to acupuncture, and the FDA nod may entice many more to try it--particularly if, as practitioners hope, its leap toward the mainstream inspires insurers to cover treatments. In most states, people who go under the needle are treated by a medical doctor; about half the states allow non-M.D. acupuncturists to practice. While requirements vary from state to state, acupuncturists generally must have certification from the National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists, which tests for competency. (State listings of practitioners are available for \$3 each by writing the NCCA at PO Box 97075, Washington, DC 20090.) For now, at least, patients will most likely have to pick up the typical \$45-per-treatment tab themselves. Only six states mandate that insurers cover acupuncture. And the beacons that the industry typically follows--Medicare and Medicaid--have no plans now to stop being stingy; the FDA's measured move wasn't endorsement enough. Sometimes insurers will pay the bills if a doctor deems treatments necessary. But it may take some needling.

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