

Healing with TCM

Traditional Chinese Medicine can relieve migraines, pain, allergies—even your high blood pressure.

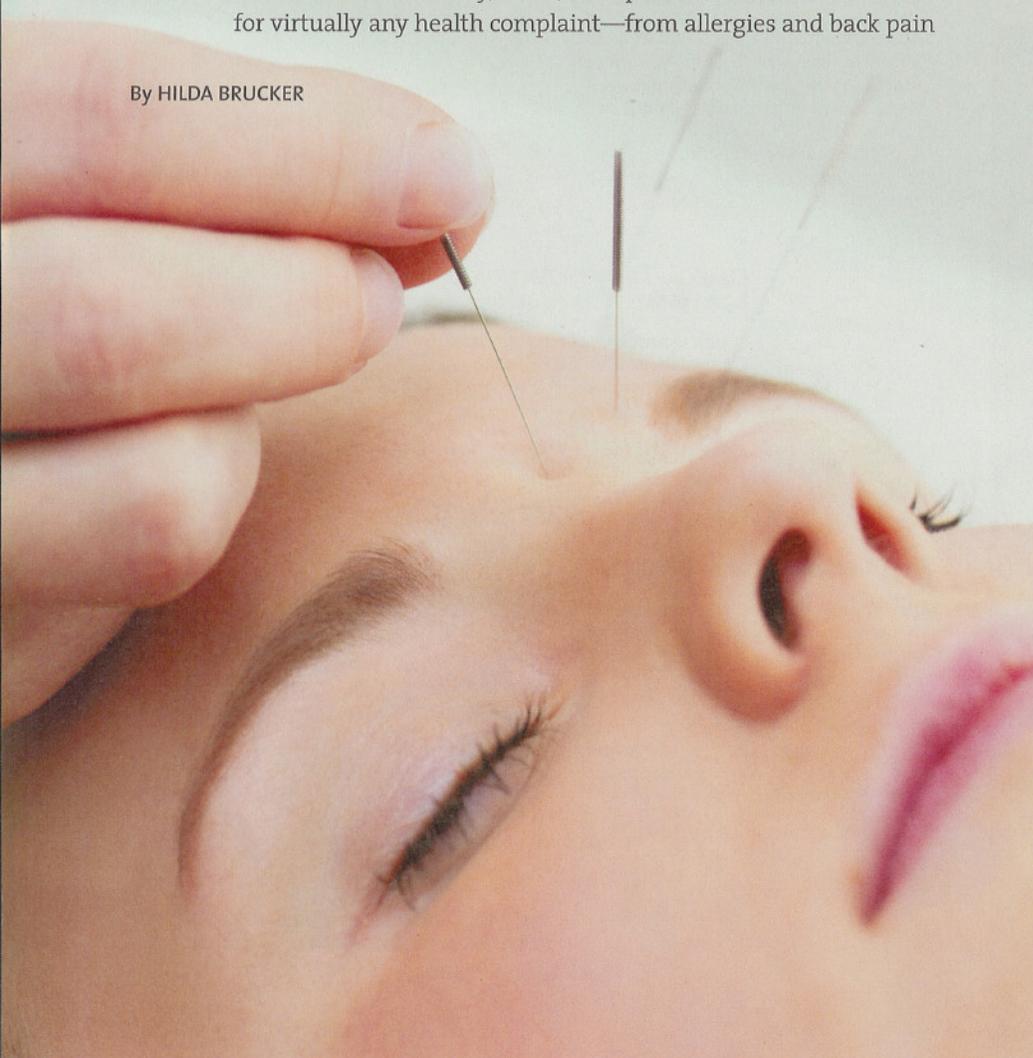
THOUSANDS OF YEARS after its inception, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is once again being embraced by people looking for a gentler, less invasive—and, in some cases, more effective—alternative to Western medicine.

HOLISTIC APPROACH. Based on a 2,000-year-old Chinese philosophy, TCM sees the body as a small universe of interconnected systems, each fueled by a life force called *qi* (pronounced “chee”). When these systems fall out of balance, the symptoms of disease arise. Using acupuncture, herbs, massage, and other therapies, TCM practitioners manipulate *qi* to treat your symptoms and correct imbalances in body, mind, and spirit. TCM can be used to care for virtually any health complaint—from allergies and back pain

By HILDA BRUCKER

SHE TRIED IT!

Last summer, 40-year-old Brigitte Thompson used acupuncture to treat severe colitis symptoms she had been suffering from since childhood. To her amazement, it worked: After three weeks, the abdominal cramping and other symptoms began to fade. By winter, she was off three of the four medications she had been taking to deal with her condition and reduced the dosage on the fourth. “Acupuncture accomplished in six months what Western medication couldn’t do in the previous 28 years,” she says.



Power plants

These common TCM herbs can support a weakened immune system and help the body re-energize.



SHE TRIED IT! Linda Partida, 42, of Windsor, Calif.—who was once prone to pneumonia and upper respiratory infections—says she relies regularly on three to four herbal formulas to boost her immune system and combat overwhelming fatigue. “Before, I didn’t have the energy to get through the day,” she says. **“The herbs have helped me bring balance back to my body and my health.”**

to high blood pressure and digestive disorders—or as a complement to conventional medicine, with almost no side effects.

STUDIES ROLL IN. Science is now starting to back TCM’s efficacy, especially acupuncture: Several studies have shown that it can match or beat conventional pain-relieving methods. Last year, for example, researchers at Duke University found acupuncture was more effective than medication at relieving many types of chronic headaches—62 percent of those using acupuncture reported relief, compared to only 45 percent of people relying on pills. The California State Oriental Medical Association now estimates that more than 15 million Americans use acupuncture yearly.

GET STARTED. Before booking your first appointment, use our guide to find out what you can expect.

Herbal medicine

Practitioners often prescribe herbal formulas to complement acupuncture treatment.

BEST FOR: A weakened immune system, skin disorders, digestive complaints, metabolic and hormonal imbalances.

WHAT TO EXPECT: A practitioner will prescribe herbs (formulas are customized from 12 or more) based on your particular complaints. The prescriptions come as decoctions (made by brewing plant stems, bark, and leaves in hot water), capsules, or a powder (which is mixed with cold or warm water and tastes better than decoctions, says Marc Sklar, a licensed provider in San Diego).

COST: \$100 and \$200 per month; herbs are available through your practitioner or online pharmacies.

HOW IT WORKS: Some of the most frequently used herbs include:

Astragalus. Preliminary studies show this common root can support a weakened immune system.

Dong quai. Another root, it’s said to be helpful in gynecological issues, hypertension, and kidney problems.

Asian ginseng. Some studies show that ginseng from China and Korea can effectively lower blood sugar. »

Lycium. Also known as wolfberry or goji berry, lycium is known for its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties and is used to boost energy and concentration.

Acupuncture

Thin, sterile needles are inserted in predetermined points on your body.

BEST FOR: All types of pain and dozens of complaints (such as migraines, anxiety, and allergies). Complementing Western medicine, acupuncture can also offset the side effects of chemotherapy, speed up recovery from surgery, or enhance fertility treatments.

WHAT TO EXPECT: During your first visit, your practitioner will ask questions about your physical condition and emotional well-being. Then you'll lie down on a massage table (you can remain partially dressed) and the practitioner will tap needles into various points on your body. The process is painless, but you may feel a slight ache upon insertion. The needles remain in place for 20 to 40 minutes, during which time the practitioner leaves you alone in the room, dimming the lights and covering you with a blanket.

COST: \$50 to \$120 per session; you may need to return for one to 12 visits.

HOW IT WORKS: Scientists theorize that needles not only stimulate nerves at the insertion point, but also affect nerve pathways in the brain, causing the release of endorphins (neurotransmitters that act as natural painkillers). A 2008 study at Harvard University seems to support this idea: Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) revealed increased brain activity in study subjects undergoing acupuncture, as compared to those receiving a placebo treatment. Other studies show that acupuncture influences circulation, which may decrease pain sensations and aid in organ function. A large 2004 University of Maryland study concluded that acupuncture significantly reduced knee pain in patients with osteoarthritis.

A TCM diet plan

Practitioners often give diet suggestions.

BEST FOR: Boosting effectiveness of other treatments; calming digestive disorders. »

TCM BASICS:

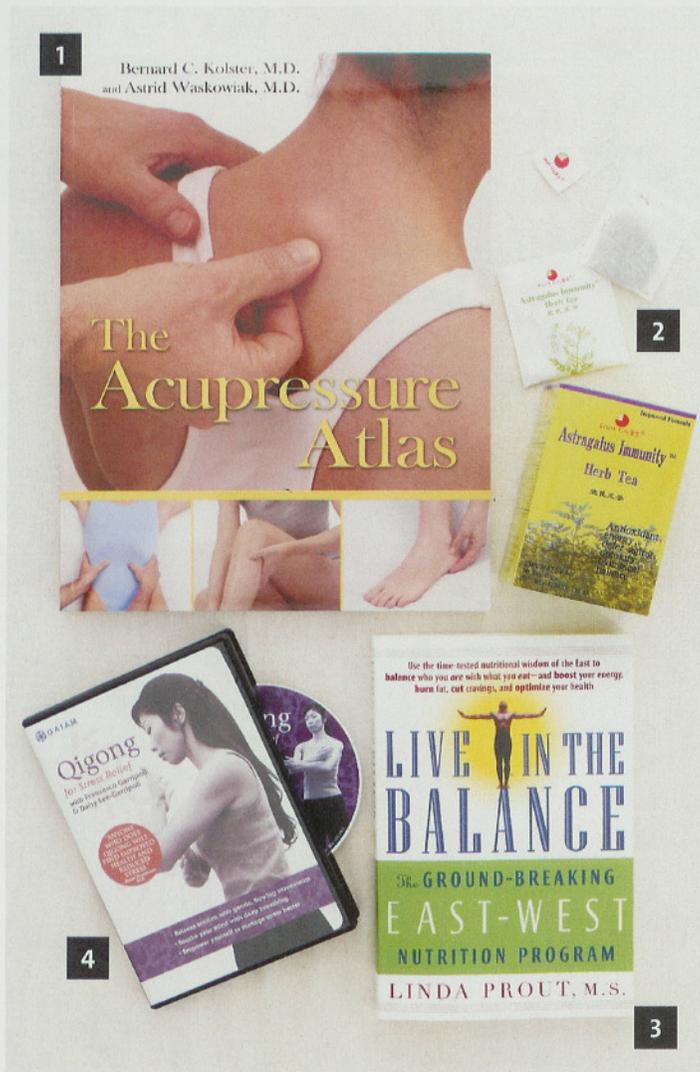
Ask your practitioner (search for someone who's qualified at nccaom.org) to explain what's happening during your treatment.

QI (pronounced "chee"): The essential life force that flows through the body. TCM manipulates qi, restoring it to organs that are deficient, and moving it away from areas where energy is blocked.

YIN AND YANG: Dynamic forces such as heat/cold and moist/dry that are in constant opposition. Disease results from a prolonged state of yin/yang imbalance.

MERIDIANS: The 12 major channels through which qi flows to all parts of the body.

"LIVER" AND "KIDNEY": When diagnosing your symptoms, your practitioner may mention your Liver or Kidney qi. These are not biomedical references. Liver describes central nervous functions and can be implicated in conditions like depression, anxiety, and headache. Kidney is associated with growth, development, reproduction, and metabolism of fluids.



HEAL AT HOME: TRY THESE TCM TOOLS

1. **THE ACUPRESSURE ATLAS** by Bernard C. Kolster, M.D. and Astrid Waskowiak, M.D. (Inner Healing Traditions, 2007; \$25; barnesandnoble.com). Find the right acupressure points to help with 40 different disorders.
2. **ASTRAGALUS IMMUNITY HERB TEA FROM HEALTH KING** (\$5.50; herbmark.com). Brew some balancing tea made from wild astragalus root and flavored with jasmine flower.
3. **LIVE IN THE BALANCE: THE GROUND-BREAKING EAST-WEST NUTRITION PROGRAM** by Linda Prout (Da Capo Press, 2000; \$15.50; amazon.com). A nutritionist demystifies the concepts behind TCM nutrition and provides helpful guidelines.
4. **QIGONG FOR STRESS RELIEF DVD** by Francesco Garripoli and Daisy Lee (\$13.50; amazon.com). Qigong is a type of meditative exercise that uses flowing movements, light stretching, and deep breathing to calm your mind and improve your flow of qi energy. This 30-minute session is deeply relaxing for students of any level.



LEARN MORE: To find out about qigong and tai chi, two forms of exercise that work on the principles of TCM, go to naturalhealthmag.com/tcmexercises.

WHAT TO EXPECT: A practitioner will work with you to create a highly personalized meal plan combining foods that correspond with yin (cooling, moistening, salty, sour, bitter) and yang (warming, drying, pungent, sweet, bland).

COST: Your diet will be discussed as part of a general consultation, which can cost between \$80 and \$120 for your first appointment. Subsequent visits may be \$50 to \$80.

HOW IT WORKS: The TCM diet does not look at vitamin content or nutrients. Instead, food is used to counter imbalances in your body. Practitioners may also prescribe an energy-based diet to mitigate the effects of lifestyle and yin/yang constitution on your health, says Linda Prout, nutritionist and author of *Live in the Balance: The Ground-Breaking East-West Nutrition Program* (Da Capo Press, 2000). Warming yang foods include beef and lamb, root vegetables, squash, oatmeal, and spices like cinnamon and ginger. Cooling yin foods are melon, cucumber, pears, beans, white fish, and spices like parsley and dill.

Acupressure & tuina massage

Acupressure is the stimulation of acupuncture points with fingers rather than with needles. Tuina (pronounced “twee-naw”) is a type of traditional therapeutic massage that can include acupressure.

BEST FOR: Musculoskeletal or neurological-based pain throughout the body.

WHAT TO EXPECT: Tuina and acupressure sessions can last 30 to 60 minutes. Recipients are often fully clothed. Expect hard pressure and vigorous stimulation.

COST: \$50 to \$80 per session.

HOW IT WORKS: Meant to manipulate the “energy” along meridians (see “TCM Basics,” page 52, for a glossary of terms), acupressure and tuina work in the same way as acupuncture: they trigger the release of pain-reducing endorphins and increase or reduce blood flow. Neither treatment is considered as effective, but they can help people warm up to acupuncture therapy if they feel nervous about needles, says Lillian Huang, L.Ac., Ph.D., an acupuncturist in Hayward, Calif. 