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Balance, on the tip of a needle

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Her older brother watches nervously, but 6-year-old Isabel Jimenez doesn't flinch when acupuncturist Ron Hershey inserts a needle into her wrist. Still, Stefan, 11, can barely contain a wince as Hershey puts three more needles in his sister's arms and legs. Minutes later, when Hershey gently removes the hair-thin needles, Stefan lets out a gasp that fills the small room at the Medical Center at Cold Spring.



Ron Hershey inserts acupuncture needles into 6 year-old Isabel Jimenez, who's being treated for asthma. She's in the lap of her mom, Liz Wisler. Wisler says Isabel's asthma was improved after six sessions of acupuncture. Hershey is with the East Mountain Center for Acupuncture & Chinese Herbal Medicine, with offices in Cold Spring and Croton-on-Hudson.

What is acupuncture?

- Acupuncture and meridians
- How acupuncture works
- What the research says
- By the numbers
- How to find a practitioner
- Glossary of Terms

On the Web

For more information on acupuncture and other non-traditional medical therapies, check out the following sites:

www.nccam.nih.gov

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is federally funded. The Web site includes comprehensive fact sheets on hundreds of therapies.

www.acupuncture.com

Created by an acupuncturist, this site includes a practitioner referral listing and an "ask the doctor" section.

www.ncahf.org

The National Council Against Health Fraud, which considers acupuncture a fraud, discusses the limitations to acupuncture.

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"It just looks freaky," says Stefan, who tagged along to his sister's appointment to learn about acupuncture. "I know it probably doesn't hurt."

It does look odd — especially on a 6-year-old — but Isabel isn't hurt. In fact, after six sessions of acupuncture her asthma has improved, says her mother, Liz Wisler, who learned of acupuncture after asking her pediatrician for options outside of traditional Western medicine.

"I really felt there has got to be another way," Wisler says. Continued, 6K

That mindset has helped fuel the tremendous interest in acupuncture. While the number of New York physicians has increased 6.8 percent in the last six years, the number of licensed acupuncturists has exploded by 157 percent, according to figures from the New York State Department of Education's Office of Professions.

This trend is expected to continue as long as research continues to prove what several recent (albeit small) studies seem to indicate: that acupuncture works.

Research notwithstanding, acupuncture has several other strong selling points:

It's drug-free, surgery-free and almost painless. It can be affordable (the average charge is \$65 to \$75 a session) and it's cheaper still when covered by health insurance.

•Sound Shore Dialysis Center

Yet don't expect it to see it in your local ER anytime soon: In spite of its popularity, no one knows for sure how effective it is, or exactly how it works.

•Sound Shore Medical Center of Westchester

Traditional Chinese acupuncturists use a non-scientific explanation. They say energy (chi) flows throughout the body in vertical and horizontal lines called meridians. Inserting acupuncture needles in certain points (there are some 3,000 of them) along the meridians can loosen chi "blockages" and, in turn, heal the patient. Preventive acupuncture can help people build up their chi and ward off potential illnesses.

•St. John's Riverside Hospital

•State of the Art Fitness

•The Burke Medical Research Institute

It's believed that acupuncture was developed as an alternative to surgery, since the ancient Chinese considered it a desecration to surgically explore a living or dead body. So instead, an acupuncturist looked for clues to what was wrong on the inside based on what he or she could observe on the outside.

•Westchester Meadows

For Hershey, a licensed acupuncturist, the ancient explanation of chi and meridians makes sense. He also says that any therapy that has been around for 3,000 years — as acupuncture has — doesn't necessarily need a scientific explanation.

It's not just the needles that help, he says. He spends at least half an hour with a patient, which is considerably more than most doctors spend.

"The stuff is not magic," Hershey says. "But it's the pattern of what is going on (internally) from a Chinese point of view. In some ways, the way we practice, we are probably closer in the way we care for people than a general practitioner."

But Western scientists, who prefer large-scale, double-blind clinical trials to prove or disprove a theory, can't test chi in a lab. Instead, they must hunt measurable changes in the body when studying the effectiveness of acupuncture, says Dr. Ravinder Mamtani, a professor of preventive medicine at New York Medical College who trains other doctors to use acupuncture.

So far, preliminary studies indicate that a cascade of "neurohormones" may be released after acupuncture. It's thought that these hormones, which include serotonin and endorphin, help to relieve pain, lower blood pressure and regulate temperature.

Mamtani says he can see these effects when he performs acupuncture, which he has been doing for 20 years.

"The more treatments I did, the more convinced I became," says Mamtani, who was at first hesitant to promote acupuncture. "I took the Hippocratic Oath, and nowhere does it say I must believe in proof before treatment."

But no one has been able to prove these findings in a large-scale clinical trial, so some physicians remain skeptical of a procedure that smacks of too-good-to-be-true simplicity: Insert needle, feel relief.

Acupuncture may always remain an "outsider treatment," because it's impossible to compare it to a placebo in a research setting, says Dr. Robert Baratz, a Massachusetts internist and president of the National Council Against Health Fraud.

In pharmaceutical research, Baratz explains, subjects are given either a real pill or a fake pill. In acupuncture studies, there is no way to scientifically use

"fake needles" or compare a pill to an acupuncture treatment.

His group is staunchly against acupuncture, arguing that the field is poorly researched and based on conjecture (or "moonbeams," as he likes to say). He has not tried acupuncture himself.

"The problem is that some of these folks have undermined the concept of scientific medicine," Baratz says. "They are trying to put forward the fact there there is some kind of medicine that has been around for thousands of years, and we, as Western doctors, are trying to hold it away from people because we want all the money.

"If, in fact, acupuncture was a phenomenon that was reproducible and had a biologically plausible mechanism underneath it, then that should come first, before the proliferation of people practicing it."

Cortlandt resident Al Coco couldn't disagree more. Still partially paralyzed from a massive stroke five years ago, he first visited Mamtani about a year ago on the advice of another doctor.

Acupuncture, for him, has been a godsend.

"It almost gives you a feeling of euphoria," Coco says. "My stroke affected my left side. When I'm lying on a table, he puts the needle on my right leg, about 6 inches below the kneecap. As soon as the skin feels the needle, my left leg elevates."

And he doesn't care why it's working; it just is, he says.

"Before you can be a good doctor, you have to treat the mind and then the body," Coco says. "It's been able to touch me in ways I can't understand... I'm not sure if it's the needles or the bond that I have with Dr. Mamtani. Well, you know, it's best not to question these things. If it feels right, do it."

Dr. Naomi Pelzig in Nyack tries to follow the same philosophy. She runs her clinic holistically, with an acupuncturist on staff and stacks of Chinese herbs on her shelves. She calls it "integrated medicine."

After medical school, Pelzig paid off loans as a staff doctor at Rikers Island prison. There, and later at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, she began noticing how effective acupuncture was on addiction.

"I felt the need to know who I was treating, not just the disease, and to alter my treatment based on subjective things I observed myself," Pelzig says. Part of that shift included using acupuncture as preventive medicine.

"Someone who is really depleted, you can add energy with acupuncture and build up their system with tonifying herbs," she says.

Her patients at her Nyack clinic seem to like her holistic approach — both she and her staff acupuncturist, Kristin Dudley, have full appointment books.

By far the top problem people seek help for is pain relief, says Dudley, who as a girl learned of acupuncture from her father's trips to China.

And most of it is stress-related pain.

"Neck pain, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome," Dudley says. "Occasionally, people say 'This is my last resort.' Others want it instead of going for drugs, or they need help with side effects."

Still, acupuncture often requires a leap of faith.

Most of Hershey's pediatric patients are the children of his adult patients. It's only after parents experience acupuncture that they try it for their kids, he says.

Although Isabel, Hershey's 6-year-old patient, has been helped by acupuncture, she will probably always need medication for her asthma, he says. But, he adds, regular acupuncture treatments mean she's getting the best of both medical worlds: Eastern and Western.

"We're not antagonistic toward conventional medicine," Hershey says. "It's not a matter of choosing one or the other. We're all in the business of healing."

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