

Acupuncture, Massage, and Chiropractic for Fibromyalgia

Q: Can acupuncture help with pain of fibromyalgia? About how many treatments can it take to see results and is it helped along if you combine it with massage therapy and chiropractic care? How do I find a reliable one in my area?

Thank you,
Debra

A: Thanks for the question, Debra.

There's just one 'c' in the spelling of acupuncture. I'm not sure where this double-c misspelling came from.

Acupressure & Tui Na

The massage that acupressurists do may or may not be Chinese medicine. If you ever go that route, check into how many years they were formally trained in acupuncture/meridian theory. The standard "real" massage of Chinese medicine is called Tui Na, which means "push and grasp." More about massage below.

Acupuncture & Chinese Medicine

Acupuncture is just one therapy you can get from Chinese medicine practitioners, who are generally called acupuncturists. "Acupuncturist" isn't a great name, since most of us also are trained in Chinese herbal medicine, cupping, moxibustion, food selection, lifestyle advice, etc. All of these therapies are based on the Chinese medical system.

Accurate Fibromyalgia (FM) Diagnosis

I want to make sure you've had a doctor spend enough time with you to get you a proper FM diagnosis according to the standardized criteria. Too many doctors just toss this term around without using the criteria (which is unethical - imagine the negative emotional impact - worry, fear, etc. - that it has on patients!) Who knows how many people think they have it, when they really have something else entirely? And so long as they try to treat the wrong thing, they'll use the wrong remedies, and whatever condition or problem you do have will remain untreated. This is one reason why I advocate seeing health professionals instead of self-care; misdiagnosis leads to the wrong treatment and perhaps even further harm. Read about the criteria for the FM diagnosis here, and make sure they've been applied to your case. If they haven't, get a second opinion!

The Chinese Medicine Treatment of Fibromyalgia

I will defer to the experience of my wife, Dr. Lynda Harvey-Carter, since she has helped hundreds of FM/CFS sufferers get better. That information is covered in this Q & A.

The upshot is that 80% of patients experienced marked improvement (decreased chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia symptoms), and 50% said they had been completely cured. This is not an instantaneous process, but most of the patients had experience significant improvement within 3-4 months.

Affordable Fibromyalgia Care

I know all of this care costs money. Most patients want to do whatever's going to be most effective at the least cost. I can't see any other reason to worry about how many times you'd have to visit an acupuncturist, so I'm going to say more about FM treatment in terms of cost-effectiveness.

Chiropractic for Fibromyalgia?

To be quite candid, for the FM sufferer, I'm not convinced that chiropractic is the best way to spend your money. Many FM/CFS sufferers experience greater pain and symptoms after an adjustment. This may be a necessary part of healing, but if there's not an x-ray confirmed spinal issue to be addressed, I wouldn't do it. Though many of them are good and honest, and though I am open-minded about their role in the treatment of non-spinal issues, chiropractors are well-known for their aggressive marketing techniques, so be careful. To be clear: chiropractic may help you. This isn't my area of expertise.

Massage for Fibromyalgia?

Massage can be nice, but I'm not sure it's the best for FM either. Deep techniques can make FM patients feel worse. The light, soothing, circulatory/Swedish style can relieve stress, and lightening the load on your sympathetic nervous system and adrenals, but there are less expensive relaxation methods. I think the best test is: how long does your relief last? If it's just a few hours, how much would it cost to maintain that benefit 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?

Acupuncture Treatment for Pain

On the other hand, acupuncture has proven its ability to relieve both new and old pain. It is the safest pain relief technique. It is the only pain reliever I know of that can wipe out chronic pain. It works via the nervous and immune

systems, which are two major systems that FM/CFS affects. It releases natural opioids that can relieve pain for 1-3 hours (endorphins) and 1-3 days (enkephalins). It also, via some other route, normalizes the way the brain interprets sensations, and erases the grooved in patterns of chronic pain.

Chinese Herbs

Chinese herbs, like acupuncture, can work systemically, and/or they can be targeted. Chinese medicine discovers your particular constitution and patterns of imbalance, and seeks to balance them, thus giving the body the strength to restore normalcy.

Working With Medical Professionals

Find health practitioners who are qualified AND that you can trust, because they have the training and experience to make accurate diagnoses, choose appropriate remedies, and make the best plan for your healing. Once you've found good practitioners, follow their advice. Trying to save money on alternative health care may tempt you to ignore your practitioner's treatment plan and see them less often than they suggest. Or, you may try to avoid professionals and get your information from magazines (whose number one goal is to sell advertising - thus, they do not go into complex medical issues or therapies in the kind of depth needed for safe and accurate usage of natural medicines, nor do they print articles that compete with or contradict their advertiser's products).

The Chinese Medicine Fibromyalgia Expert

If there is a FM/CFS expert in Chinese medicine, it's Lynda Harvey-Carter. I haven't heard of anyone else who's had as much success. To follow her program, you'll need to go to a Chinese medicine practitioner for a good 12-16 weekly visits, get herbs and take them religiously, do some counseling on any emotional issues you have (pre-FM, or just dealing with FM), change your diet, take certain nutrients, and get involved in spiritual growth that requires growth of character, trust, surrender, hope, and faith. The patients who were most willing to make the most changes in their lives were most likely to recover completely from their FM.

The other insight that Lynda had about recovery from FM is that the sooner you catch it and treat it, the better recovery you can have. It's not unheard of for people newly diagnosed with it to get serious about treating it and completely recover. I mean it goes away. For good.

But if you only go halfway, or you wait too long to do something about it, you may be ensuring that you have to put up with this pain for the rest of your life.

How to Find a Good CM Practitioner in Your Area

Use my website's acupuncturist-finding resource (see below). Most people end up at the National database. Remember, when you search your city or state, that although some practitioners have not taken the national herbs test, they may still be trained in, good at, and legally allowed to prescribe Chinese herbs. Many states only look at the acupuncture test, and include Chinese herbs in the acupuncturist's scope of practice.

A common question patients ask is "how many people have you treated with my disease?" That's a sensible question, but perhaps not always the best one. Most CM practitioners treat a little bit of everything. Some try to specialize, or end up get referrals for a particular disease, but most are general practitioners. I'd say this is possible because, although CM is quite complex, it is not nearly as complex as most western medicine (WM) specialties. Also, WM specialization has become the norm, and because there are 800,000 of them in the U.S., they may have to specialize! However, there are only about 15,000 acupuncturists here, so we need not, and perhaps cannot specialize yet. Fortunately, we learn enough in school to be good general practitioners, and there are more and more reference books. Many experienced practitioners have shared their successes with the rest of us, and translators are constantly offering English-speaking acupuncturists new Chinese experience or research on many topics.

About the Author

Acupuncturist, herbalist, and medical professor Brian B. Carter founded the alternative health megasite The Pulse of Oriental Medicine (<http://www.PulseMed.org>). He is the author of the book "Powerful Body, Peaceful Mind: How to Heal Yourself with Foods, Herbs, and Acupressure" (November, 2004). Brian speaks on radio across the country, and has been quoted and interviewed by Real Simple, Glamour, and ESPN magazines.