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## Warming Up to Moxibustion

by Melissa Carr, Dr.TCM, RAc

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Moxibustion is one of those powerful medical treatments that is so simple, it is often underestimated. It has been used in Asian natural medicine systems for thousands of years.

This traditional therapy involves the burning of a herb called moxa, or in Chinese, *ai ye*. In the West, the herb is known as mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*). The treatments are done at specific acupuncture points along the body, depending on what condition is being addressed. The heat of the burning moxa is said to stimulate *qi* (pronounced “chee”) or life energy, improve blood circulation, speed healing, and improve immunity.

### Direct Moxa

Moxibustion starts with the making of moxa wool. Once the moxa herb is aged, it is ground up into a spongy fluff (the wool), then pressed and shaped by hand into a cone or stick. The cone has a sturdy base, and it can be placed directly on the skin along appropriate acupuncture points on the body before the pointy end of the cone is lit. This is called direct moxa.

If direct moxa is allowed to stay on the skin until it burns out completely, it can lead to localized blisters and scarring. This method is rarely used in North America. With nonscarring direct moxibustion, the moxa cone is removed before it becomes too hot, and the sensation is a pleasant and comforting deep warmth. The moxa cone may also be placed on top of another substance, such as a slice of ginger, which can also reduce the intensity of the heat and change the properties of the moxibustion treatment.

### Indirect Moxa

The more commonly practised form of moxibustion is indirect moxibustion, where a moxa stick—which looks similar to a cigar—is held close to the acupuncture point being treated, but never touches the skin. Again, the sensation is a relaxing, deep warmth.

Finally, acupuncture and moxibustion can be used in concert by wrapping the end of the needle in a small moxa cone and lighting it.

### Traditional Uses and Clinical Trials

Moxibustion has been used by traditional Chinese medical practitioners to treat acute and chronic pain issues such as back pain, frozen shoulder, and carpal tunnel syndrome; digestive problems including diarrhea and IBS (irritable bowel syndrome); menstrual disorders; and impotence and decreased libido. The herb *ai ye* is also used internally to move blood and has been used to stimulate menstruation, improve blood circulation in the pelvic area, and relieve menstrual cramps.

Moxibustion is also used traditionally to correct breech pregnancy, and there is some clinical evidence to support this. In one trial of 130 women in their 33rd week of pregnancy, it was reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that after two weeks of moxa treatments, more breech fetuses were rotated to a normal birth position than those in the control group.

A randomized study of 439 patients with Bell’s palsy (acute facial paralysis caused by inflammation of the facial nerves) found a combination of acupuncture and moxibustion to be more effective than either a drug-and vitamin-treatment protocol or an untreated control group.

Moxibustion is also currently being studied as a treatment for arthritis based on its traditional reputation for reducing inflammation and improving immune function.

### Is Moxibustion Right for You?

Although Western scientific research on moxibustion is limited, the therapy has been used safely for thousands of years. It is not suitable for everyone, however, and you should consult with a qualified practitioner before embarking on this route of treatment. While there is no regulation on the use of moxibustion in Canada, TCM doctors and practitioners are educated on how and when to use moxibustion.

### About the Author

Melissa Carr, Dr.TCM, RAc, is a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine who loves to give her patients the tools they need to be optimally well. [activetcm.com](http://activetcm.com)

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