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OPINION COLUMN

Acupuncture gets straight to the point of pain

Melissa Carr, 24 hours
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(QMI AGENCY FILE PHOTO)

Acupuncture is not voodoo, though to some, that's exactly what it may look and feel like.

While this therapy is thousands of years old, and there are scientific theories about how acupuncture works, a lot of unknowns remain.

To many, this ancient practice is mysterious and such questions as, 'How does an acupuncture point at the wrist reduce nausea?' And, 'What causes the weird sensations, known in Chinese as de qi when acupuncture is performed?' are common.

Some of the evidence supporting how acupuncture works includes:

— Acupuncture causes a release of endorphins. These are feel-good hormones that can help relieve pain, balance mood and deal with stress. For this reason, many acupuncture patients find themselves extremely relaxed during and after treatment. Aaahhhcupuncture

1 of 1 (read like a sigh).

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— The pain-gate theory states that there are nerves that transmit pain and others that inhibit pain. Acupuncture is said to stimulate the

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nerves that inhibit pain. When someone has chronic pain, the brain can get stuck in a pain loop, continuing to fire the same pain signals even after the original pain stimulus is gone. Acupuncture can also help stop this by re-educating the brain to change its signals.

- Acupuncture increases local blood circulation by increasing the amount of the body's natural nitric oxide — something not to be confused with nitrous oxide or laughing gas!
- Acupuncture stimulates the release of serotonin, another feel-good hormone that is key to preventing and treating depression.
- The insertion and twisting action of acupuncture wraps myofascial fibres around the needle, thus stimulating signals to the tissues to release tension. This, along with the pain-gate theory and increased blood flow, may result in some of those 'weird' sensations.
- When acupuncture has been done while a functional MRI displays the changing activities of the brain, studies have shown that specific points demonstrate specific changes in line with traditional point selection. For example, a point at the foot called LIV3 stimulated the same area of the brain active when light is flashed at the eyes. A different nearby point didn't affect this same area of the brain.
- Other studies have found acupuncture points are areas of reduced bioelectric and biomagnetic resistance.

So, how does acupuncture work? Probably by a multitude of systems working together. The body is complex, so it's not at all surprising that a treatment can relieve pain, improve digestion, balance hormones, boost energy, calm the mind, and more might be mistaken for voodoo magic.

Melissa Carr is a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, caring for patients in an integrative medicine clinic in Vancouver.

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