

FEMALE

# health

TODAY

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# Seeking Wellness

**Patients and physicians are looking to acupuncture to bring the body back into balance.**

By **Marnie Hayutin**

» **FOURTEEN YEARS AGO THERE SEEMED TO BE NO RELIEF IN SIGHT** for Marijo Flamm's chronic migraine headaches. For six days out of every menstrual cycle, she battled debilitating pain that made going to work and caring for her four children nearly impossible tasks.

Medication took the edge off and allowed her to get out of bed, but Flamm was miserable all day. Compounding the problem, her menstrual cycle had shortened to 21 days rather than the typical 28, so the migraines were occurring frequently.

"I thought, I can't live my life like this anymore," recalls Flamm, a Monfort Heights resident. "There's got to be something."

Flamm's East Coast sister-in-law recommended acupuncture, something Flamm admits she didn't know the first thing about. But days later when she saw acupuncture services listed on the marquee at the Mercy HealthPlex in Western Hills, she took it as a sign from God. Flamm signed up for a five-session package with Carole Paine, MS, L.Ac., now owner of Cincinnati Acupuncture.

"I have not had a migraine in 14 years, and she reset my menstrual cycle from 21 to 28 days," Flamm says. "That was such a blessing. At that point, I was sold [on acupuncture.]"

## INTEREST AND AWARENESS

Today, acupuncture wouldn't sound nearly as mysterious as it did in 2000 when it was first recommended to Flamm. The last decade or so has seen slow and steady growth, both in the availability of acupuncture services in Cincinnati and the interest for it in the community. In addition to traditionally trained acupuncturists like Paine, Cincinnati has several physician acupuncturists who incorporate the treatment into their Western medical practices. And most of the major hospital systems are exploring integrative medicine to varying degrees, offering acupuncture and other holistic services as complements to Western medical treatments.

"The fact that a major health care system has just hired a physician to provide acupuncture, that's huge," notes Eleanor Glass, MD, medical acupuncturist for UC Health Integrative Medicine. "That never would have happened 20 years ago."

The reasons for growth, practitioners say, are twofold: First, it's driven by patients, who are learning about alternative therapies in this global information age and who are also embracing natural options in their diets and in their homes.

"I think the medical systems are responding to what patients want, which is alternative methods that make them feel better and help them respond to their own bodies in conjunction with their typical Western medical treatments," Dr. Glass notes.

It's also driven by doctors, who discovered over time that there are still some tools missing from the Western medicine toolbox.

"You look at all the cutting-edge [Western medical] discoveries, new theories, gene mutations. Those are amazing discoveries," says Peter Sheng, MD, medical director for TriHealth Integrative Health and Medicine, as well as an oncologist and an internist. "On the other hand, for a lot of the patients with multiple chronic illnesses, we don't have very good solutions other than giving them prescription drugs." It's not uncommon for Dr. Sheng to see patients who are taking 15 to 20 different medications. "How do they interact?" Dr. Sheng asks. "Honestly, nobody can answer."

## WHAT IS ACUPUNCTURE?

Dating back to the 2nd century B.C., acupuncture uses very thin needles to unblock the body's vital life force energy, which is known as "chi" (also spelled "qi"), and move it through the 12 meridians of the body.

Western medicine doesn't have a concept that correlates to meridians, but Western doctors say it seems to work with the neurochemical systems of the body. There are many forms and variations of acupuncture, but essentially they all utilize the 365 major energetic points on the body, along with the thousands of minor points. Practitioners stick ultra-fine needles in at the energetic points that correspond to various systems and organs. The needles are thinner than a human hair, so often the patient can't feel the insertion point at all. But, interestingly, the moving chi may unblock another point that's farther up the energetic channel, so a needle placed in, say, the leg may be felt in the hand.

At this time, we still don't know exactly why and how it works, but research is beginning to confirm that it does.

**"There's a lot of science behind it," notes Dotty Shaffer, MD, a physician acupuncturist and an internist. "On functional MRIs, the visual cortex of the brain will light up when points are put in the foot that are used to treat eye problems."**

"On a weekly basis, I am e-mailed a new article where someone is investigating the efficacy of acupuncture," Dr. Glass adds. Current research is documenting the major biochemical shifts and the changes in neuroendocrine modulators that take place in the body when acupuncture is performed. Examining acupuncture's effects on specific illnesses and quantifying dosage protocols are the next big steps in research, she says, and UC hopes to be a part of it.

Although patients may seek acupuncture to address a particular symptom or ailment, the goal of the treatment is actually to bring the body as a whole back into balance and to allow it to heal itself, says Liz Woolford, MD, director of physician education, a family physician and a medical acupuncturist at the Alliance Institute for Integrative Medicine. As such, patients have experienced remarkable results for chronic conditions including allergies, inflammation and pain, hormonal imbalances, insomnia, weight management, smoking cessation and infertility.

As the only board-certified reproduc-

tive endocrinologist in the country who is also a physician acupuncturist, NeeOo Chin, MD, provides acupuncture for nearly all his fertility patients.

"I've found that the pregnancy rates are just so much better," says Dr. Chin, director of the Fertility Wellness Institute of Ohio in West Chester. "It seems to improve uterine blood flow, it improves ovarian blood flow, it improves pituitary blood flow, and it rebalances the reproductive hormones."

Although he hasn't attempted to quantify his results scientifically, Dr. Chin can say this: "There are people who have had two or three years of infertility, who have not conceived with other people, who have come to see me and they're tired of doing fertility treatments, and I do nothing but acupuncture, and they conceive within the next two, three, four months without doing any other treatment."



**You become more respectful that there are things that modern medicine can't explain.**



## WHAT TO EXPECT

Patients may find relief after only one session, perhaps for something like neck pain or plantar fasciitis. For migraine headaches or smoking cessation, patients might need a series of treatments to resolve the issue. And after resolution, some find that they want to check in every few months for a maintenance treatment.

Although insurance coverage has expanded somewhat in recent years, it's still not what you'll find in states like California. Patients can, however, put pre-tax money aside in medical savings accounts to help defray the cost. Price-wise, acupuncture treatment is comparable to a spa treatment, ranging from about \$80 to around \$120.

In fact, some actually liken the acupuncture experience to a rejuvenating treatment at a spa because, in addition to symptom relief, it provides what patients describe as a remarkable sense of well-being.

"Acupuncture is generally very de-stressing," Paine says. "People might come for a pain issue and get many side benefits."

## WHAT ISN'T ACUPUNCTURE?

"It's not magic," says Dr. Chin.

"It's not a religion," Dr. Shaffer adds.

It, unfortunately, won't cure end-stage cancer, and if you need your appendix out you'd better go to the Emergency Room. In other words, no one expects it to replace Western medicine.

What it does, says Dr. Sheng, is offer a very individualized treatment as a complement to our one-size-fits-all Western approach. As a Western physician, he was trained to address symptoms and the patients' "chief complaints." As both a physician acupuncturist and a practitioner of Chinese Herbal Medicine, he looks at the body as whole to search for how the complaints are interrelated.

"With acupuncture you don't just follow a formula," Dr. Woolford concurs. "You personalize and see what the person's body needs each time you treat them."

You don't have to believe in it for it to work, either. If you did, Dr. Chin would not be practicing acupuncture today. In 2008 he was "dragged in" for the procedure by his wife, Kim, after two unexplained bleeding episodes threatened his life. Despite the fact that three generations of his family had all been practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the idea was completely at odds with his Western medical training. **After experiencing his own remarkable recovery following acupuncture treatment with Dr. Shaffer, he became trained in it as well.**

"I'm a very good example of East meets West," he says, taking a moment to marvel at the irony of performing the most cutting-edge fertility treatments and one of the most ancient medical arts, all in the same practice.

"I was there," he says, describing his former Western-only medical mindset. "But I think you become more open-minded, you become more respectful that there are things that modern medicine can't explain."

To that end, a patient offers this advice: "Don't try and understand it before you go," says Leslie Meier, a Northern Kentucky resident and a patient at the Alliance Institute for Integrative Medicine. "I still can't explain all the methodology. I just know it works." ●