

Role of Traditional Asian Medicine

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COMMENTARY

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has evolved over thousands of years. TCM practitioners use various psychological and/or physical approaches (such as acupuncture and tai chi) as well as herbal products to address health problems. Acupuncture is a technique in which practitioners stimulate specific points on the body, usually by inserting thin needles through the skin. Studies suggest that acupuncture stimulates the release of the body's natural painkillers and affects areas in the brain involved in processing pain; however, some trials suggest that real acupuncture and sham acupuncture are equally effective, indicating a placebo effect. Results from a number of studies, however, suggest real acupuncture may help ease types of pain that are often chronic, such as low-back pain, neck pain, osteoarthritis/knee pain, and carpal tunnel syndrome. It also may help reduce the frequency of tension headaches and prevent migraine headaches. [1-3]

Tai chi combines certain postures, gentle movements, mental focus, breathing, and relaxation. Research findings suggest that practicing tai chi may improve balance and stability in older people and those with Parkinson's disease, reduce pain from [4] knee osteoarthritis, help people cope with fibromyalgia and back pain, and promote quality of life and improve mood in people with heart failure. Chinese herbal products have been studied for many medical problems, including stroke, heart disease, mental disorders, and respiratory diseases (such as bronchitis and the common cold), and a national survey showed that about one in five Americans use them.[5-6] Because many studies have been of poor quality, no firm conclusions can be made about their effectiveness.

Some Chinese herbal products have been found to be contaminated with undeclared plant or animal material; drugs (such as the blood-thinner warfarin and the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agent diclofenac); heavy metals (such as arsenic, lead, and cadmium); pesticides or compounds called sulfites, which could cause asthma or severe allergic reactions; or incorrect herbs, some of which have caused organ damage.[7-8]

Relatively few complications from using acupuncture have been reported. Still, complications have resulted from the use of non-sterile needles and improper delivery of treatments. When not delivered properly, acupuncture can cause serious adverse effects, including infections, punctured organs, collapsed lungs, and injury to the central nervous system.

Tai chi and a similar technique called qi gong appear to be safe practices. While it's unlikely that tai chi will result in serious injury, it may be associated with minor aches and pains. Women who are pregnant should talk with their health care providers before beginning tai chi, qi gong, or any other exercise program. This is also called life energy or vital energy.[9] The

belief is that it runs throughout your body. It's always on the move and constantly changes. TCM treatments often focus on ways to promote and maintain the flow of qi.

The belief is that everything in life has a little bit of its opposite, too, and balance is the key. For example, a drug from your doctor might heal disease. But it's dangerous if you take too much of it. According to TCM, these ideas play out in our bodies. When you balance the yin and yang of Qi, you feel healthy and well. If they're out of whack, you feel sick. TCM aims to create harmony and a healthy flow of qi.[10]

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Citation: Siddha N (2021) Role of Traditional Asian Medicine. *Curr Res Integr Med*. 6(3)

Received: 01 January, 2022, Manuscript No. PULCRIM-21-3718; Editor assigned: 03 January, 2022, Pre-QC No. PULCRIM-21-3718(PQ); Reviewed: 19 January, 2022, QC No. PULCRIM-21-3718; Revised: 22 January, 2022, Manuscript No. PULCRIM-21-3718(R); Published: 28 January, 2022, DOI: 10.37532.2022.7.2 28, 2021



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