

FAQs on Acupuncture for Digestive Disorders

How is acupuncture effective for treating my digestive complaints?

Everyone carries their stress somewhere in their body. It may be the neck and shoulders, the lungs, the uterus or the skin. For many it is the stomach and intestines.

Emotional stress activates the sympathetic nervous system, the “fight or flight” or stress response that gets your adrenaline running in order to react to danger. One of the changes that occurs in your body during the stress response is that blood is diverted away from your intestines into your arms and legs. In addition, digestive functions such as peristalsis are inhibited. This was a survival adaptation – your ancestors didn’t need to be digesting when something was trying to digest them.

The stress response was meant to be activated for only short periods of time to give your body an extra advantage for survival. It was like a short-term energy boost, after which you would sleep and replenish yourself. In modern societies, however, emotional stress can become chronic, lasting for weeks, months or even years.

Ancient Chinese physicians recognized the deleterious effects of chronic emotional stress on the human body. They observed that emotional stress impairs function of the internal organs, disrupts hormonal and enzymatic balance, and depletes your body of nutrient substances it needs for normal maintenance and repair.

Acupuncture therapy is especially effective in calming the sympathetic nervous system in order to deactivate the stress response. By activating both the nervous and humoral (blood) systems, acupuncture increases local blood circulation and immune response, stimulates the release of endorphins and other pain-killing neuropeptides, and promotes physiologic homeostasis.

What about Chinese herbs?

You may be asked to take an herbal formula concurrently with your acupuncture treatments. Herbal formulas are appropriate when it is determined that part of your complaint is due to a deficiency of nutritive substances your body needs for proper functioning. There may also be a metabolic insufficiency such that your body has difficulty to absorb, process or transport the food passing through the intestinal tract. In essence, herbal formulas add something that your body needs while acupuncture helps it to utilize more efficiently what is already there.

What types of gastro-intestinal disorders can acupuncture treat?

Acupuncture is particularly effective for stress-related functional disorders regardless of the presenting symptoms. Irritable bowel syndrome tends to respond well. Functional gastritis and colitis will respond to treatment, although progress will be slower with

the onset of physically detectable changes in the gut. Acupuncture can also treat gastro-esophageal reflux disease, esophageal spasms, uncomplicated ulcers and hemorrhoids, and paralytic ileus.

How many treatments will it take before I start feeling better?

Acupuncture can promote the healing processes in your body like few other therapies can. However, it is not magic and does not work instantaneously. The course of therapy will depend upon how long your complaint has persisted, its severity, complicating factors, and most importantly, your own body’s capacity to heal itself. For most GI complaints in a person who is otherwise in relatively good health, you should see progress within 6-8 treatments, with the total course of therapy being 12-24 treatments. At the beginning, you will be asked to come in at least 2 times a week for 2-4 weeks, and the frequency will decrease as your complaint improves. You may also be given recommendations for herbal therapy and lifestyle modifications. It is important to emphasize that your progress depends upon following the recommendations of your acupuncturist.

I don’t like needles! Will acupuncture hurt?

Many people imagine that acupuncture will be painful because of their previous experiences with immunizations. Hypodermic needles used for immunizations and blood draws have a hollow center and are many times thicker than an acupuncture needle, which is as thin as a strand of hair. In fact, several acupuncture needles can actually be inserted into the hollow tube of a hypodermic needle. People often do not feel anything at all, or else only a momentary prick when an acupuncture needle is inserted. In addition, we use only single-use, pre-sterilized needles, so there is virtually no risk of infection.

Will my insurance pay for acupuncture treatments?

Due to strong consumer demand, more insurance plans are offering acupuncture benefits every year. It is important to check with your individual plan beforehand to determine whether you have benefits. Many PPO plans offer some acupuncture benefits. Most HMOs still do not cover acupuncture, although that too is changing. We offer discounted services of 25% or more for patients who must pay out-of-pocket.



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