

Migraine Treatment in the Acupuncture Clinic

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Migraines, though not life threatening, can cause disability and greatly affect quality of life. Recent research indicates that abstaining from any medications for migraines for 3 to 6 months can dramatically reduce the frequency and severity of migraines. But how to decrease migraines without medication? Acupuncture is a nonpharmacological modality and has been shown to decrease migraine incidence¹ (in one study better than topamax²). In another study verum acupuncture not only successfully reduced migraine incidence but also reduced the autonomic response to valsalva maneuver³, implying an autonomic connection. Increasing parasympathetic tone is the focus of pharmaceutical device companies⁴ in targeting transcutaneous vagal stimulation for migraine treatment. These therapies are not without risks⁵. Acupuncture has been shown to stabilize autonomic response⁶, and increase parasympathetic tone⁷. The author routinely documents this increase with Heart Rate Variability monitoring in conjunction with effective acupuncture treatment. This improved autonomic balance and stability, or increased resilience, may be part of the physiological basis of acupuncture's effectiveness. In the clinic, patients describe sensations that would usually lead to a full blown migraine, but after a series of acupuncture treatments, the migraine never develops. The patient has become "hardier", or more resilient.

In addition to acupuncture for migraine, points are added to increase parasympathetic activity. Helpful adjuncts are ear tacks, if tolerated by the patient, in the cymbaoncha region of the ear. If poor sleep is a trigger (or even if not), melatonin (3mg) has been shown to be a more effective preventative⁸ than amitryptiline with minimal side effects. If migraines are related to the menstrual cycle (in Traditional Chinese Medicine a signal of blood stagnation or deficiency) an iron supplement can be recommended. Though treatment can take months to achieve optimal reduction in migraines, sometimes they are reduced in a few sessions.

¹ Coeytaux RR1,2, Befus D3 Role of Acupuncture in the Treatment or Prevention of Migraine, Tension-Type Headache, or Chronic Headache Disorders..*Headache*. 2016 Jul;56(7):1238-40.

² Yang CP, Chang MH, Liu PE, et al. Acupuncture versus topiramate in chronic migraine prophylaxis: A randomized clinical trial. *Cephalalgia*. 2011 Nov;31(15):1510-21.

³ Wallasch TM, Weinschuetz T, Mueller B, Kropp P. Cerebrovascular response in migraineurs during prophylactic treatment with acupuncture: a randomized controlled trial *J Altern Complement Med*. 2012 Aug;18(8):777-83.

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- ⁴ Silberstein SD, Calhoun AH, Lipton RB, et al Chronic migraine headache prevention with noninvasive vagus nerve stimulation: The EVENT study. *Neurology*. 2016 Aug 2;87(5):529-38.
- ⁵ Rossi S1, Santarnecchi E2, Valenza G3, Olivelli M4 The heart side of brain neuromodulation. *Philos Trans A Math Phys Eng Sci*. 2016 May 13;374(2067).
- ⁶ Villas-Boas JD, Dias DP, Trigo PI et, al Acupuncture Affects Autonomic and Endocrine but Not Behavioural Responses Induced by Startle in Horses. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med*. 2015;2015:219579.
- ⁷ Waki Hideaki,1 Hisajima Tatsuya,2,3 Miyazaki Shogo,2 Effect of 100 Hz electroacupuncture on salivary immunoglobulin A and the autonomic nervous system *Acupunct Med*. 2015 Dec; 33(6): 451–456.
- ⁸ Gonçalves AL1, Martini Ferreira A2, Ribeiro RT3, Randomised clinical trial comparing melatonin 3 mg, amitriptyline 25 mg and placebo for migraine prevention *Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry*. 2016 May 10.