

# backgrounder

## Traditional Chinese Medicine: An Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) originated in ancient China and has evolved over thousands of years. TCM practitioners use herbs, acupuncture, and other methods to treat a wide range of conditions. In the United States, TCM is considered part of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). This fact sheet provides a general overview of TCM and suggests sources for additional information.

### Key Points

- Herbal remedies and acupuncture are the treatments most commonly used by TCM practitioners. Other TCM practices include moxibustion, cupping, massage, mind-body therapy, and dietary therapy.
- The TCM view of how the human body works, what causes illness, and how to treat illness is different from Western medicine concepts. Although TCM is used by the American public, scientific evidence of its effectiveness is, for the most part, limited. Acupuncture has the largest body of evidence and is considered safe if practiced correctly. Some Chinese herbal remedies may be safe, but others may not be.
- TCM is typically delivered by a practitioner. Before using TCM, ask about the practitioner's qualifications, including training and licensure.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

### Background

Traditional Chinese medicine, which encompasses many different practices, is rooted in the ancient philosophy of Taoism and dates back more than 5,000 years. Today, TCM is practiced side by side with Western medicine in many of China's hospitals and clinics.

TCM is widely used in the United States. Although the exact number of people who use TCM in the United States is unknown, it was estimated in 1997 that some 10,000 practitioners served more

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than 1 million patients each year. According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, which included questions on the use of various CAM therapies, an estimated 3.1 million U.S. adults had used acupuncture in the previous year. In addition, according to this same survey, approximately 17 percent of adults use natural products, including herbs, making it the most commonly used therapy. In another survey, more than one-third of the patients at six large acupuncture clinics said they also received Chinese herbal treatments at the clinics.

## Underlying Concepts

Underlying the practice of TCM is a unique view of the world and the human body that is different from Western medicine concepts. This view is based on the ancient Chinese perception of humans as microcosms of the larger, surrounding universe—interconnected with nature and subject to its forces. The human body is regarded as an organic entity in which the various organs, tissues, and other parts have distinct functions but are all interdependent. In this view, health and disease relate to balance of the functions.

The theoretical framework of TCM has a number of key components:

- **Yin-yang theory**—the concept of two opposing, yet complementary, forces that shape the world and all life—is central to TCM.
- In the TCM view, a vital energy or life force called **qi** circulates in the body through a system of pathways called **meridians**. Health is an ongoing process of maintaining balance and harmony in the circulation of qi.
- The TCM approach uses **eight principles** to analyze symptoms and categorize conditions: cold/heat, interior/exterior, excess/deficiency, and yin/yang (the chief principles). TCM also uses the theory of **five elements**—fire, earth, metal, water, and wood—to explain how the body works; these elements correspond to particular organs and tissues in the body.

These concepts are documented in the *Huang Di Nei Jing (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor)*, the classic Chinese medicine text.

## Treatment

TCM emphasizes individualized treatment. Practitioners traditionally used four methods to evaluate a patient's condition: observing (especially the tongue), hearing/smelling, asking/interviewing, and touching/palpating (especially the pulse).

TCM practitioners use a variety of therapies in an effort to promote health and treat disease. The most commonly used are Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture.

- **Chinese herbal medicine.** The Chinese *materia medica* (a pharmacological reference book used by TCM practitioners) contains hundreds of medicinal substances—primarily plants, but also some minerals and animal products—classified by their perceived action in the body. Different parts of plants such as the leaves, roots, stems, flowers, and seeds are used. Usually, herbs are combined in formulas and given as teas, capsules, tinctures, or powders.
- **Acupuncture.** By stimulating specific points on the body, most often by inserting thin metal needles through the skin, practitioners seek to remove blockages in the flow of qi.

Other TCM therapies include **moxibustion** (burning moxa—a cone or stick of dried herb, usually mugwort—on or near the skin, sometimes in conjunction with acupuncture); **cupping** (applying a heated cup to the skin to create a slight suction); **Chinese massage**; mind-body therapies such as **qi gong** and **tai chi**; and **dietary therapy**.

## Status of TCM Research

In spite of the widespread use of TCM in China and its use in the West, scientific evidence of its effectiveness is, for the most part, limited. TCM's complexity and underlying conceptual foundations present challenges for researchers seeking evidence on whether and how it works. Most research has focused on specific modalities, primarily acupuncture and Chinese herbal remedies.

Acupuncture research has produced a large body of scientific evidence. Studies suggest that it may be useful for a number of different conditions, but additional research is still needed.

Chinese herbal medicine has also been studied for a wide range of conditions. Most of the research has been done in China. Although there is evidence that herbs may be effective for some conditions, most studies have been methodologically flawed, and additional, better designed research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

### Examples of TCM Uses and Studies

Both acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have been used and studied for a wide range of conditions. A few examples are

#### Acupuncture

- Back pain
- Chemotherapy-induced nausea
- Depression
- Osteoarthritis

#### Chinese herbal medicine

- Cancer
- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- HIV/AIDS

## Safety

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations for dietary supplements (including manufactured herbal products) are not the same as those for prescription or over-the-counter drugs; in general, the regulations for dietary supplements are less strict. Some Chinese herbal treatments may be safe, but others may not. There have been reports of products being contaminated with drugs, toxins, or heavy metals or not containing the listed ingredients. Some of the herbs are very powerful, can interact with drugs, and may have serious side effects. For example, the Chinese herb ephedra (ma huang) has been linked to serious health complications, including heart attack and stroke. In 2004, the FDA banned the sale of ephedra-containing dietary supplements used for weight loss and performance enhancement, but the ban does not apply to TCM remedies or to herbal teas.

Acupuncture is considered safe when performed by an experienced practitioner using sterile needles.

## **Training, Licensing, and Certification**

Most states license acupuncture, but states vary in their inclusion of other TCM components (e.g., herbal medicine) in the licenses they issue. The federally recognized Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM) accredits schools that teach acupuncture and TCM, and about one-third of the states that license acupuncture require graduation from an ACAOM-accredited school. The National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) offers separate certification programs in acupuncture, Chinese herbology, and Oriental bodywork. Almost all licensing states require completion of NCCAOM's national written exam; some states also require a practical exam.

## **If You Are Thinking About Using TCM**

- Look for published research studies on TCM for the health condition that interests you.
- If you are thinking about trying TCM herbal remedies, it is better to use these products under the supervision of a medical professional trained in herbal medicine than to try to treat yourself.
- Ask about the training and experience of the TCM practitioner you are considering.
- Do not use TCM as a replacement for effective conventional care or as a reason to postpone seeing a doctor about a medical problem.
- If you are pregnant or nursing, or are thinking of using TCM to treat a child, you should be especially sure to consult your health care provider.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about CAM, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign at [nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/](http://nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/).

## **NCCAM-Funded Research**

Recent NCCAM-supported studies have been investigating:

- TCM for endometriosis-related pelvic pain, irritable bowel syndrome, and temporomandibular (jaw) disorders
- Chinese herbal medicines for food allergies and for osteoarthritis of the knee
- Consistency of TCM practitioners' diagnosis and herbal prescriptions for rheumatoid arthritis patients.

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## **For More Information**

### **NCCAM Clearinghouse**

The NCCAM Clearinghouse provides information on CAM and NCCAM, including publications and searches of Federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The Clearinghouse does not provide medical advice, treatment recommendations, or referrals to practitioners.

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

Web site: [nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov)

E-mail: [info@nccam.nih.gov](mailto:info@nccam.nih.gov)

### **PubMed®**

A service of the National Library of Medicine (NLM), PubMed contains publication information and (in most cases) brief summaries of articles from scientific and medical journals. CAM on PubMed, developed jointly by NCCAM and NLM, is a subset of the PubMed system and focuses on the topic of CAM.

Web site: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez)

CAM on PubMed: [nccam.nih.gov/research/camonpubmed/](http://nccam.nih.gov/research/camonpubmed/)

## **The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews**

The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews is a collection of evidence-based reviews produced by the Cochrane Library, an international nonprofit organization. The reviews summarize the results of clinical trials on health care interventions. Summaries are free; full-text reviews are by subscription only.

Web site: [www.cochrane.org/reviews](http://www.cochrane.org/reviews)

## **ClinicalTrials.gov**

ClinicalTrials.gov is a database of information on federally and privately supported clinical trials (research studies in people) for a wide range of diseases and conditions. It is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Web site: [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov)

## **CRISP (Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects)**

CRISP is a database of information on federally funded scientific and medical research projects being conducted at research institutions.

Web site: [www.crisp.cit.nih.gov](http://www.crisp.cit.nih.gov)

## **NIH National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus**

To provide resources that help answer health questions, MedlinePlus brings together authoritative information from the National Institutes of Health as well as other Government agencies and health-related organizations.

Web site: [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)

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