

"Long before it's in the papers"

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Study maps acupuncture's effects on brain

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Courtesy University of York
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New research about the effects of acupuncture on the brain may shed light on the complex mechanisms of this Eastern healing technique, scientists say.

Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese method in which thin needles are inserted into the skin at selected spots to treat various ailments.



Practitioners say the procedure helps bring the body's energy into balance. Western scientists tend to be skeptical of such explanations; yet regardless of the reasons behind any effects of acupuncture, certain studies have indicated that it is helpful for some conditions.

The new study, by researchers at the University of York and the Hull York Medical School in the U.K., indicates that acupuncture changes the activity in specific brain structures. When a patient receives acupuncture treatment, tradition holds that a sensation called "deqi" can result. Scientific analysis shows "deqi" is associated with a deactivation of pain-linked brain areas, according to the authors of the new study, published in the journal *Brain Research*.

“Whether such brain deactivations constitute a mechanism which underlies or contributes to the therapeutic effect of acupuncture is an intriguing possibility which requires further research,” added neuroscientist Aziz Asghar, of the York Neuroimaging Centre and the Hull York Medical School.

Acupuncture’s effectiveness remains in dispute, and riddles remain.

Curiously, some recent studies have suggested that a sort of sham acupuncture is just as effective as regular acupuncture for treatment of discomfort. In the “simulated” acupuncture, needles are stuck in the skin at places that aren’t those mandated by the traditional acupuncture system.

Although such results would seem to suggest acupuncture’s effects are mainly psychological, other studies have found the technique works better than conventional Western treatments against conditions including back pain and cancer-related nausea.

Last summer, following research at York, the U.K.’s National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence recommended acupuncture as a treatment option for lower back pain. Clinical trials at the university are also investigating the technique’s effectiveness for Irritable Bowel Syndrome and depression.

Recent U.S. studies also show acupuncture can be an effective treatment for migraines and osteoarthritis of the knee, according to the U.K. group, whose members say the new research could help acupuncture become more accepted as a treatment option for a number of conditions.