



# Ohh My Aching Head!— Treating Headaches with Asian Medicine\*

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Headaches!—one of the miseries of life, and for some people, all too common. Asian medicine has developed a complex diagnostic system to distinguish types of headaches, and offers a range of treatments that clinical experience and research have shown to be effective.

The most common types of headaches known through biomedicine (the medical system in which the lead practitioner is an MD) are tension headaches, migraine and cluster headaches, and sinus headaches. People can also have headaches after trauma or various biomedical procedures, as a symptom of toxicity or pressure with infection, tumor, allergy, or as a result of dehydration.

In Chinese medicine, all of the above causes make sense, but we interpret what is going on somewhat differently, and thus offer a different set of treatments. Chinese medicine focuses on how Qi ('energy') is moving in the body, and how malfunctions in energy movement show up. Sometimes they show up as pain in the head. However, rarely does pain in the head occur all by itself---usually there are patterns of dysfunction elsewhere in the body that signal what is going on at a deeper level.

## **Ask An Acupuncturist!**

If you have headaches and see an acupuncturist, expect her to ask you to describe *where* you have pain, *what kind* of pain, *when it began*, *how long* you've been troubled, and *what sets it off*. Then she'll likely ask you a raft of questions about what you eat and when and how, how much you exercise and sleep, if you smoke, drink alcohol or eat meat, and even how often you have sex. All these factors matter and help distinguish not just the 'type' of headache, but it's deep cause.

Your practitioner will also examine you by taking your pulses (a complex process in Chinese medicine), tapping various points on your body, and looking at your tongue. Did you know that the health of the whole body is revealed on the tongue?

Her eventual diagnosis will be expressed in terms of the flow of energy through your *energy meridians* or *channels*. Do you have a Stomach headache, Liver or Gallbladder headache, Urinary Bladder headache? Is there too much Yang reaching your head? Or, in contrast, is there a deficiency of Yang in your head? Is it a constitutional problem? Associated with your workplace? Having a toxic component? With answers to all this, your practitioner can give a name to your type of headache, and can create a treatment plan. This plan won't involve pharmaceutical drugs, but likely will include recommendations about acupuncture, perhaps herbs or enzymes, dietary modifications,

allergy elimination, and any other actions that should improve your underlying situation, such as taking up a practice of moving meditation (qi gung, tai chi, or yoga), or doing certain exercises.

### **Five Real Headaches**

*Jane* (all names changed) complained of pain in her forehead and across the top edges of her eye sockets, runny nose, and seasonal allergies. The pain was achy, and sometimes her face felt stuffy and damp. The tip of her tongue was swollen. Her MD had told her that she had ‘sinus’ headaches, and urged to use antibiotics to combat sinus infections.

*Tom* had extremely painful throbbing and stabbing pain, sometimes as often as three times a week, with most of the pain occurring in or behind his eyes. He also complained of auras, nausea, and frequent stiff necks. He’d been told he had migraine headaches. He’d been given prescriptions for pain killers, but he didn’t like their side effects and anyway, felt their effectiveness was waning.

*Suzanne* complained of headaches that came on just before her menstrual periods, along with cramps, short temper, swollen breasts, and clots in her menstrual blood. She never had headaches otherwise, but this frustratingly predictable monthly cycle was getting her down.

*Anna* complained of headaches on the side of her head, just above her sore jaw. She’d been diagnosed with temporo-mandibular joint dysfunction (TMJ), and wore a night guard to hold her jaw in place while sleeping. Her pain had already lasted 3 years, her teeth didn’t meet normally, and she was unable to eat many foods.

*Larry* had headaches whenever he played sports. He admitted he didn’t drink enough water, but, he explained, water tasted horrible...so did sweet sports drinks! Meanwhile, he complained that his feet swelled after a few hours in his sports shoes.

Notice that both Tom and Jane had pain near the eyes. To an Asian medicine practitioner, eye pain often signals an issue with the Liver, which is in charge of ensuring the smooth flow of Qi. However, Jane and Tom’s pain was different in location and in intensity.

Jane’s achy pain was on the edge of the eye sockets--over two of the sinuses--and the sorest spots belong to the Urinary Bladder meridian. This long channel dances over the scalp and runs down the back and legs, winding up at the edge of the small toe. It’s yin-yang partner is Kidney, and the health of the Kidney has a lot to do with whether or not one has allergies. Her swollen tongue and nasal symptoms pointed to the Lung, reached via the Lung meridian. Accordingly, Jane was treated on the Lung, Bladder and Kidney meridians, provided with herbs to prevent sinus flare-ups, and offered allergy elimination. Once her allergies were under control and the inflammation in her sinuses calmed, the

headaches were gone, and she felt well. She no longer had to take antibiotics and thus her immune system also had a chance to heal.

Tom's case was more complicated. His headaches had started in childhood, and he'd had to make many accommodations in life just to deal with the frequent severe pain. He was frustrated and tired. When examined, most of his pain was at the base of the skull in back. This is over the 'visual' region of the brain and helps explain his auras as well as the location of the pain in the eyes. He had pain on the temples as well. Looking at the map of the meridians, his practitioner noticed that his pain locations implicated both the Urinary Bladder and Gallbladder meridians. Their yin-yang partners are Kidney and Liver. So Tom was showing a pattern of Kidney and Liver malfunction. Given that his pain started in childhood, he was treated for deficiency, using acupuncture. He was also given two herbal combinations, one to deal with acute pain, and one to *prevent* headaches. Over a period of several months the frequency and intensity of his headaches lessened. He slept better, began to exercise, regained strength and energy, and found life much sweeter.

Suzanne received a diagnosis of Liver Qi Stagnation—common among pressured overworked North Americans. Recall that the Liver has the task of keeping the energy flowing smoothly. Looking at Suzanne's symptoms you can see that things are not flowing smoothly—there are clots, pain, irritability, cravings, and in short, stuckness. The acupuncture task here is to get the energy moving again, which will rapidly—often in just in a few minutes!—create relaxation, reduce frustration and irritability, and stop pain. The second task is to figure out what is causing the energy to stagnate—is it a bad job situation? poor diet in the pre-menstrual period? deficiency in one of the Organs? Her practitioner helped Suzanne recognize how she raced through life in a profound state of intensity. With the help of acupuncture to relax her and show the way, she found enjoyable ways to exercise, rest, eat better, and avoid headaches. For a few months she also used herbs to support smooth energy flow in the week before her menstrual cycle. For some time now she has been free of both headache and PMS symptoms.

Anna's headache was secondary to a swollen inflamed jaw joint. Using needles locally near the joint, and also in the hands, her acupuncturist healed the jaw in just 5 treatments, with major pain relief at the first treatment, and normal bite after the third treatment. Anna ecstatically reported that at last she could again eat corn on the cob.

Larry was given advice on how to make water taste better, and acupuncture to improve the ability of his body to distribute water evenly. These two actions made it easier for him to drink enough, and both his dehydration headaches, and his swollen ankle problem, disappeared.

### **What Does the Research Say?**

The amount of quality research on acupuncture care is rapidly increasing. Nevertheless, since formal clinical research has only been done for some 25-30 years, it is not always

easy to find quality articles on the topic of interest, in this case, headaches. If you have particular interest in research, start by googling [www.acubriefs.com](http://www.acubriefs.com). This site provides critical reviews of published articles.

Several articles concerning headache came up when I recently did a search. The bottom line is: yes, by scientific measure, acupuncture is generally helpful for treating headaches. For example, a 2000 review of 27 published studies reporting on 1,088 patients found acupuncture “promising” in 23/27 studies. Another reviewing acupuncture for the care of dysmenorrhea (painful periods) also was generally positive though the scientific quality of the studies was only fair.

The best of the articles was a study done in Italy that compared migraine relief with either a pharmaceutical drug or acupuncture (Allais et al, *Headache* 42:855-861). This well-designed study enrolled 160 women with frequent migraine without aura, for six months of treatment. The results showed that after 2 months those receiving acupuncture were having fewer migraine attacks than those on the drug, but that difference had disappeared at six months. Pain intensity, however, decreased only with the acupuncture. Finally, patients reported fewer side effects with acupuncture than with the drug. The authors summarized “acupuncture was more effective early on and had superior tolerability.”

### **Should You Try Asian Medicine for Headache Relief?**

Yes!—if you are not getting adequate relief or recovery from your current medical care.

While Asian medical care is not a ‘sure cure’, acupuncture, herbal therapy, moving meditation, and dietary modifications can go a long way toward relieving pain of all kinds, including headache pain. Note that Asian medical care does demand that *you* do some of the work—it is more than just remembering to take a pill! Acupuncturists generally feel that it is the whole person—not just their head—that is in pain and needs relief, so treatment is two-armed. The first arm is to provide acute pain relief. The second arm is to improve the health of the whole body-person by addressing the malfunction that underlies headaches, and helping the patient prevent headache by making lifestyle changes. These changes put you more in charge of your own health and wellness. Clinically, centuries of observation show that when patients take the reins into their own hands they can improve their lives and their outlook, reduce their pain, and become well.

So—what are you waiting for? If you or someone you love suffers from recurring headaches pick up the phone and call your professional acupuncturist. You have little to lose but your pain!