

ACUPUNCTURE AND IMPOTENCE

What is it?

Erectile dysfunction.

Sometimes caused by structural blockage and other organic issues but mostly a functional disorder (and most people coming for acupuncture would fall into this category) – caused by trauma, stress, emotional and psychological problems, drugs; and, for the Chinese, very much due to excess sex and masturbation (still referred to as a disease in some recent papers).

Western medicine

The reproductive organs are innervated by sympathetic, parasympathetic and somatic nerves. An erection requires the sympathetic and parasympathetic working together (even though they have opposing functions) and dysfunction of this balance may lead to impotence.

Functional impotence usually involves a dysfunction of the hypothalamus-hypophysis-testes axis, i.e. hormonal disturbance – lower testosterone and higher oestradiol in the serum of sufferers

TCM

The kidneys store 'essence' and dominate reproduction – hence weak kidneys are believed to be at the root of most diminished sexual functioning. The liver is also often implicated as it shares the same root with the kidneys. A number of other patterns may be treated but the kidneys and liver are the main focus for male urogenital disorders.

Other acupuncture approaches

Of course there are many. Some incorporate knowledge of Western physiology and are discussed below.

How acupuncture may work in impotence

1. Alter levels of sex hormones via the hypothalamus-hypophysis-testes.
There is quite a lot of evidence that such hormonal systems in general can be affected by acupuncture. Also there is some specific evidence re. sex hormones:
Chinese study (2000). 69 men with functional impotence – after acupuncture treatment the serum testosterone levels rose by a factor of more than 4 times, oestradiol decreased to more than a third of previous, and prolactin to more than a quarter (and this was accompanied by substantial improvements in the impotence).

2. By regulating the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which may be at the base of most functional impotence – watch for accompanying symptoms of over-sweating, over-nervousness, palpitations, temperature imbalance, insomnia and poor sleep/waking patterns. The technique is altered depending whether there is a need to slow down or speed up physiological processes in the person. No direct evidence but acupuncture has been shown to affect the ANS in various other physiological functions (e.g. cardiovascular, women's reproductive).
3. Sacral points may stimulate the pudendal nerve directly and affect generally the innervation of the reproductive organs (which comes from the sacral section of the spinal cord).
4. Local points in the groin will improve the circulation in the genitals.
A prominent Japanese practitioner is even known to use a special diode ring to go around the penis – produces minute electrical charge to stimulate the circulation.

Clinical studies of effectiveness

There are many **Chinese** uncontrolled trials, with reasonably large numbers (up to 500). Reported levels of success are of the order of 60-90% effective (can get an erection but still not perform sexual intercourse satisfactorily) and 15-85% cured (erection + normal intercourse). [Recent examples: Fu (00), Guo et al (99), Li et al (99), Chang and Zhu (98), Zhang (97)]

Very little work **elsewhere**:

Turkey (1997) – a controlled trial

Acupuncture group – 60% response

Hypnosis group – 75% response

Control group (no treatment) – 45% response

Acupuncture was better than the control, but not statistically significantly so: this was only a small trial.

Turkey (1994)

20 out of 29 patients could get an erection after a course of acupuncture (beforehand, none were able to)

Holland (99)

After 8 treatments 39% of subjects had better sexual activity (of which a good part was due to erection), but there were no changes in hormone levels. (Very small trial & used same points throughout).

Other aspects of male sexual dysfunction/infertility – ejaculation problems, sperm disorders

Chinese, French, German, US and Israeli studies have found that acupuncture can improve aspects such as sperm motility and concentration (especially motility) – and hence improve fertility.

There are positive Chinese studies on ejaculation disorders.