

"Acupuncture: Can It Make You Look Younger?"

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Why are so many people turning to this ancient treatment for nonsurgical facelifts, fertility boosts, backache cures and more?

-- Dana Wood

On a scale of 1 to 10 of the things women will do to get pregnant, I'm at about level 2: concerned, but not quite ready to dive into the nearest vat of fertility hormones. Whether I'm in denial or just a massive wimp, I'm all about baby steps. Lucky for me, the retro-chic wellness treatment du jour - acupuncture - is winning raves for its alleged ability to help in the little-bundle-of-joy department. But what isn't acupuncture being touted for these days? Literally thousands of years old, this ancient secret is suddenly having a major moment.

Acupuncture's rising star is due in part to a wave of serious reviews by entities like the World Health Organization and the National Institutes of Health, which have recognized the procedure's success in treating numerous conditions. And then there's the celeb factor. A slew of stars is reportedly keen on acupuncture, from Madonna to Gwyneth Paltrow. The latter has credited her acupuncturist with helping to resolve her love life.

To learn more, I head to Madison Avenue's Exhale Spa to chat with **acupuncturist Robert MacDonald, owner of the Midtown-based Intentional Health and Wellness (917-915-6481) and director of healing at Exhale's two Manhattan outposts (212-249-3000)**. Needling away such ailments as migraines, anxiety and perimenopause, **MacDonald and his team spend their days tending to stressed-out superachievers**. Before we tackle my case, however, MacDonald gives me an overview of this millennia-old modality. For starters, acupuncture is part of a larger system of traditional Chinese, or Oriental, medicine (TCM or TOM) - alongside lots of hard-to-pronounce treatments like Tui Na and Qi Gong. (The now-trendy cupping also falls under the TCM/TOM umbrella.)

Via the insertion of very thin needles along invisible pathways called meridians, acupuncture aims to improve the flow of Qi (a.k.a. chi), which is said to regulate the body's spiritual, mental and physical balance. **"The ancient Chinese had an amazing understanding of systems and functions of the body," says MacDonald. "It's a holistic, wellness-based preventative medicine that is meant to address literally everything."** Though there's no definitive Western explanation for how and why acupuncture works, mainstream scientists are learning more about it all the time. Essentially, the insertion of the acupuncture needles is thought to stimulate positive physiological responses in the body. From the release of endorphins and serotonin (a key reason acupuncture is so successful in treating pain), to the stimulation of the



hypothalamus and pituitary gland and an increase in immune function, the systemic effects of acupuncture are thought to be considerable.

I'm relieved to learn that hyperqualified acupuncturists like MacDonald often undergo four to six years of training, although in some states, it is possible for practitioners such as chiropractors and physical therapists (or even dentists) to obtain a certificate to perform acupuncture after just 100 to 300 hours of training. In the right hands, safety is all but a given, but as with any procedure involving needles, proper hygiene is critical. The majority of acupuncturists today use presterilized single-use disposable needles made from high-quality surgical stainless steel.

At Exhale, it's time for my "intake," the debriefing session that precedes every acupuncture treatment. "Stick out your tongue," says MacDonald, simultaneously grabbing my wrists so he can check my pulse at various points. He scrutinizes some pesky dark circles under my eyes, then starts in with a host of embarrassing personal questions. In his defense, I have already tipped him off that I've been trying to get pregnant for well over a year. My diagnosis: Qi and blood-flow stagnation, with an underlying kidney deficiency. "It doesn't mean you have some kind of Western disease pathology," he says. "You don't need to go get your kidneys X-rayed. We just need to determine what your pattern of 'disharmony' is, with the goal of regulating your menstrual cycle."

And with that, MacDonald is off and needling, sticking me in a total of nine spots - dead center in the middle of my forehead, near my thumbs and around my knees and ankles. The needles hurt just a little, right at the point of insertion (it feels like a rubber band being snapped at your skin), and they don't leave a trace of bruising. **Hopping off the table about 20 minutes later and zipping back into an appointment-packed day, I am calm and stress-free for hours.....**