Acu News

"He who has health, has hope; and he who has hope, has everything".-Thomas Carlyle

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Acupuncture for Rehabilitation from Sports Injury

Sports injuries are an incredibly common reason patients first seek out treatment with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). From a TCM perspective, there are numerous energetic imbalances that may have predisposed someone to a particular injury, or may now be affected by the injury. A trained practitioner will look at the location of the injury, the depth of the injury, and the pathology of the injury.

A sports injury anywhere on the body may have the following components:

Blood Stasis: Blood stasis is often caused by trauma to the local area, such as falling on the soccer field or getting hit with a hockey stick. Symptoms of blood stasis include sharp and stabbing pain that is worse with pressure, bruising and skin discoloration. When the stasis is severe it may affect sleep. Sports injuries such as bone breaks, contusions, fractures, tendon and ligament tears frequently have a blood stasis component.

Qi Stagnation: Qi stagnation can be caused by trauma but more frequently is caused by overuse, repetitive motion, poor posture or form while doing an exercise. Pain from a Qi stagnation injury tends to be dull, achy, throbbing and diffuse. Normally it is worse with pressure, but may be better with gentle movement. Common injuries that often involve Qi stagnation are tendonitis, muscle strains, chronically tight muscles and shin splints.

Heat: Both Qi stagnation and blood stagnation can generate heat, which is a TCM explanation for lots of kinds of inflammation. Any sports injury that presents as red, hot and swollen has a heat component to it.

Cold: Just as pathogenic heat can be a factor in sports injuries, so too can pathogenic cold. There is an idea in TCM that cold can "direct strike" an organ or energy system, leading to severe, acute, cramping pain. This often occurs after exposure to cold, such as running a race on a cold day, swimming in cold water or sitting in an ice bath after a workout. Cold can also be a factor in certain chronic areas of pain, particularly when bone is involved or when the injury is in a location that doesn't get a lot of blood flow.

Blood Deficiency: Any acute sports injury has a component of stagnation or stasis. However, there may be an underlying blood deficiency that allowed the tissues to be more susceptible to injury. The blood is said to nourish the tendons, so this is particularly true in tendon injuries such as tennis elbow or achilles tendonitis. Blood deficiency may also be a result of a sports injury, such as a concussion, which means the body needs more resources to rebuild itself after the injury.

Luckily, TCM has numerous ways of treating sports injuries and helping in the rehabilitation process:

Acupuncture: Acupuncture can help to increase blood flow to an area, reduce pain, inflammation and help tissues heal.

Chinese Herbal Medicine: Herbal formulas can be applied topically in the form of liniments, plasters, poultices, creams and ointments. Certain herbal formulas are also appropriate to be taken internally to help with pain or associated symptoms during the recovery phase. Depending on the herbal formula, it may target pain, tension, inflammation, swelling, or circulation. Herbal formulas can be tailored to fit any of the diagnoses mentioned above. Clinically, we often use topical applications of herbs for soft tissue injuries such as tendonitis, muscle strains and sprains. Certain formulas are also appropriate for bone injuries such as fractures, breaks, and spurs.

Moxa: Burning moxa, or moxibustion, can be a very effective therapy for many sports injuries. Moxa is burned over certain points or locations to reduce pain, increase range of motion, eliminate cold from the channels and reduce inflammation. Moxa is frequently used for injuries to the bone, injuries involving cold or any injury that heat seems to make feel better.

Gua Sha: Gua sha refers to a TCM technique of scraping along a channel or particular muscle fibers with a hard curved tool. Gua sha breaks up adhesions that have formed in the muscle tissue, increases blood flow to the area and helps eliminate toxins stuck in a particular location. Gua sha is excellent for treating Qi and blood stagnation injuries.

Cupping: Cupping is another technique from TCM that uses special sterilized cups to create suction over large muscle areas. This helps muscles to relax, pulls toxins out of the channels and helps to physically pull apart layers of fascia that get stuck together with injury.

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