HEALTH BASICS

Chinese medicine

Chinese medicine is a group of traditional practices that includes acupuncture, herbal products, massage, and movement therapies.

WHAT IT IS
A traditional system of health practices

WHERE IT COMES UP
Acupuncture, herbal products, massage, and movement therapy

WHY IT MATTERS
Treatments may offer benefits but can also cause harm

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or conventional diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, pharmacist, or regulated acupuncture service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No single test; treatment and product review

Overview

Chinese medicine is a broad group of health practices developed in China over many centuries. It is often called traditional Chinese medicine, or TCM.

It is not a disease or a diagnosis. It is a system used to understand health and provide treatments. Practices may include:

You may meet Chinese medicine as complementary care, meaning it is used alongside conventional medical treatment. Some people use it as alternative care, meaning they use it instead of conventional treatment. Replacing effective medical care can carry risks, especially when assessment or treatment is time-sensitive.

Chinese medicine is not one standard treatment. An acupuncture session, a tai chi class, and a multi-herb formula are very different interventions. Their possible benefits, evidence, and risks need to be considered separately.

- Acupuncture, which places thin needles through the skin
- Chinese herbal products
- Moxibustion, which burns dried plant material near the skin

- Cupping, which applies suction to the skin
- Tui na, a form of massage and body manipulation
- Movement and breathing practices such as tai chi and qigong
- Dietary advice based on traditional Chinese medicine concepts

How it works

Traditional Chinese medicine describes health using ideas such as qi , often translated as vital energy, and the balance of yin and yang . It also describes pathways called meridians . Practitioners may assess the tongue, feel the pulse, and ask about sleep, digestion, temperature, pain, and other experiences.

These traditional concepts do not directly match structures or measurements used in modern anatomy and laboratory medicine. There is no standard blood test or scan that measures qi, yin and yang, or meridians.

Researchers also study individual practices using modern scientific methods. Acupuncture may affect nerves, muscles, connective tissue, and the way the brain processes pain. These possible mechanisms do not prove that acupuncture works for every condition.

Herbal products work differently. Plants contain active chemicals that can affect the body. The effect depends on the species, plant part, preparation, amount, and other ingredients. A traditional formula may contain several substances, making its effects and interactions harder to predict.

Tai chi and qigong combine movement, balance, controlled breathing, and attention. Their effects may partly come from physical activity, balance practice, relaxation, and social participation.

Evidence should be considered for the exact practice and health problem. Research on acupuncture for one type of pain does not show that acupuncture treats unrelated conditions. Evidence for one tested herbal formula also cannot be applied to every product sold under a similar name.

Why it matters for your health

Some Chinese medicine practices may help with selected health concerns. Research suggests acupuncture may provide benefit for certain types of pain and some other specific problems. The size of the benefit and certainty of the evidence differ by condition.

Movement practices such as tai chi may support balance, physical function, and general activity for some people. They can often be adapted, but the level and type of movement still need to fit your mobility and health.

Evidence for Chinese herbal medicine is more difficult to interpret. Studies may use different formulas, and products with the same name may not contain exactly the same ingredients. Some studies are small or have methods that make firm conclusions difficult.

"Traditional" and "natural" do not mean harmless. Herbal ingredients can have drug-like effects. They may interact with prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, or other supplements. Product quality may also be affected by incorrect plant identification, contamination, hidden medicines, pesticides, or heavy metals.

Acupuncture is generally associated with fewer systemic effects than herbal treatment, but it still involves breaking the skin. Safe practice requires appropriate training, clean technique, and sterile, single-use needles.

What can go wrong

Possible problems relate to the particular treatment, not to Chinese medicine as a single condition.

Acupuncture can cause short-lived soreness, minor bleeding, or bruising. Less common but more serious complications include infection, nerve injury, and injury to an internal organ. A punctured lung, called a pneumothorax , is a rare medical emergency that can cause sudden chest pain or difficulty breathing.

Cupping may leave circular bruises. Strong suction, heated cups, or poor technique can cause burns, blisters, skin damage, or infection. Moxibustion can also cause burns and may worsen breathing problems caused by smoke.

Forceful body manipulation may not be suitable for someone with fragile bones, a recent injury, a bleeding disorder, or certain spine or joint conditions.

Chinese herbal products may cause allergic reactions, liver injury, kidney injury, bleeding, changes in blood pressure, or interactions with medicines. Aristolochic acid, found in some incorrectly used or contaminated herbal products, is linked to serious kidney damage and cancer. Hidden prescription-drug ingredients have also been found in some products marketed as supplements.

Pregnancy, breastfeeding, childhood, planned surgery, liver or kidney disease, and the use of blood thinners or other regular medicines require particular care when considering herbal products.

Routine follow-up is appropriate for mild effects such as bruising or soreness that do not settle as expected. Contact a clinician promptly for yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, persistent vomiting, fever, spreading redness, drainage from a needle site, or unusual bleeding.

Seek emergency care for sudden trouble breathing, severe chest pain, facial or throat swelling, fainting, confusion, new severe weakness, or heavy bleeding. If someone may have taken a poisonous or unknown product, contact the local poison information service or emergency service.

What you can do

There is no single test that can tell you whether "Chinese medicine" is suitable. The useful checks concern the specific treatment, product, practitioner, and reason for using it.

Before starting, you can:

Do not rely on claims that a product can treat many unrelated conditions, works without any risk, or must be kept secret from your usual healthcare team.

If a product has no complete ingredient list, there may be no reliable way for you or a pharmacist to assess it. In that situation, the practical answer may be not to use it.

Chinese medicine should not delay assessment of a new, unexplained, worsening, or urgent health problem. Keep taking prescribed medicine unless the clinician responsible for that medicine advises a change.

- Ask what exact problem the treatment is intended to address
- Ask what evidence supports that specific treatment
- Check whether the practitioner is licensed or registered where required
- For acupuncture, ask whether sterile, single-use needles are used
- Show a pharmacist or clinician the full herbal ingredient list
- Keep the package, batch number, receipt, and photographs of the label
- Tell all involved clinicians about supplements and complementary treatments
- Ask about interactions if you take regular medicine or have surgery planned

Common questions

Is Chinese medicine the same as acupuncture?

No. Acupuncture is one practice within Chinese medicine. Herbal products, massage, cupping, moxibustion, tai chi, and qigong are different practices with different evidence and risks.

Can Chinese medicine be combined with conventional treatment?

Sometimes. The main concerns are treatment interactions, duplicated effects, and delays in needed care. Give your clinician or pharmacist the exact product names and ingredients rather than saying only that you use herbs.

Are Chinese herbal products regulated like prescription medicines?

Not always. Regulation differs by country and by how the product is sold. A product may not have been tested to the same standard as a licensed medicine.

Does "natural" mean a product is safer?

No. Natural substances can be powerful, toxic, contaminated, or unsafe when combined with medicines. The identity and amount of each ingredient matter.

Can a medical test confirm a traditional Chinese medicine diagnosis?

There is no conventional laboratory test or scan that confirms concepts such as qi imbalance or meridian blockage. Standard tests may still be needed to investigate the health concern that led you to seek treatment.

Should I tell my clinician if I only use Chinese medicine occasionally?

Yes, especially if you use herbal products, are pregnant, have liver or kidney disease, take regular medicines, or are preparing for surgery. Bringing the label or a photograph can make the discussion more useful.

Sources

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