CHAPTER 13

Sports Medicine Acupoints

One of the most common questions that people ask about Chinese medicine is, "How do acupuncture points work?" There is no simple answer to this question; however, modern science has conducted experiments and from these formulated several theories:

1. Stimulation of acupuncture points (or "acupoints") releases endorphins. Endorphins are peptides secreted in the brain that have a pain-relieving effect like morphine.

2. Acupuncture points somehow affect the nerves and can be used to block pain by preventing pain impulses from propagating from the spinal cord to the brain.

3. Research has indicated that the meridians conduct electrical currents and that skin resistance to these currents is less at acupoints. Acupoints may function like transformers or boosters by modulating the electrical activity in particular areas of the body.

While these theories are interesting, they do not fully explain the effects produced by stimulating acupoints with an acupuncture needle or massage techniques. In the past, much of the scientific research on acupoints was conducted to explain their effectiveness in managing pain. Such research was stimulated by the
use of acupuncture analgesia as a replacement for general anesthetic during surgical procedures. Only recently has research been directed toward understanding the other effects acupuncture and acupressure produce in the body.

In Chinese medicine, acupoints are places where the flow of qi and blood can be influenced or modified to regulate the functional activities of the body. This means that acupoints can not only reduce pain, but also help regulate and harmonize the functions of the internal organs and the musculoskeletal system. In addition to the main meridians, which have deep connections to the internal organs, there are tendinomuscular meridians, which directly relate to the movement of muscles and joints. Through these meridians, acupoints can help relieve muscles that are in spasm and improve local circulation and joint mobility. This is why an acupoint like stomach 36 (ST 36) can be used by acupuncturists to treat a wide variety of problems:

- Gastrointestinal problems such as nausea, indigestion, bloating, and vomiting, because the stomach meridian has an internal connection with the stomach and intestines.
- Headache, hypertension, and dizziness, because the stomach meridian starts in the head and travels down to the feet. Therefore, ST 36 can be used to draw excess energy away from the head.
- Pain, injury, and weakness of the lower extremities, because the stomach meridian passes through the front of the hip, knee, and ankle.

In the West, we use a numbering system to list the acupoints on each meridian and diagram its pathway. In China, each point has a name, often poetic in nature. Sometimes, as in the case of ST 36 (zu san li), the name gives us insight into how the point is used. Zu san li means “leg three-li point” because of its ability to energize the legs so one could walk three more li, a distance of about three miles. The names of other points sometimes refer to their location or have more obscure meanings. I have included a standard translation of the Chinese name for each point, but only those names that give insight into the point’s function will be discussed in detail.

So, will pressing ST 36 cure your torn meniscus? Probably not. However, stimulating acupoints is an important part of the first-aid treatment of sports injuries. Acupoints can help reduce pain and increase joint mobility, particularly if used in conjunction with the other therapies discussed in this book. They can also be used after the acute phase, during the healing and rehabilitation process, to direct the body’s healing energies to the injured area. No one point will work all the time on every person, but the points discussed in this section are the strongest and work most of the time for most people. Acupoints can be used preventatively. If your legs ache after you run, don’t ignore it until the pain becomes chronic. Remember, pain is a sign that energy and blood are not circulating freely. Use acupoints to relieve the pain and reestablish the free flow of qi and blood.

**HOW TO STIMULATE ACUPOINTS**

Acupoints can be stimulated with finger pressure. This is often just as effective as acupuncture. Direct pressure with the thumb, finger, or knuckles is one of the simplest and most effective methods of stimulating acupoints. Press the point lightly and shallowly, progressing slowly deeper until you feel a distending sensation around the point or a dull ache that spreads or travels outward from the point. Press and hold the point until pain subsides and you feel the muscles relax. In cases of fractures or suspected fractures, do not press acupoints that are directly over the site of the injury.

![Figure 96.](image-url)
THE LIMB ENERGIZERS

Stomach 36 (ST 36)
Large intestine 10 (LI 10)
Zu san li (leg three-li point)
Shou san li (arm three-li point)

These points energize the limbs by releasing energy into the meridians of the arms and legs. ST 36 is traditionally known as the "leg three-li point" because of its ability to energize the legs so one could walk three more li, a distance of about three miles. LI 10 is its corollary in the upper body, the "arm three-li point."

ST 36—Location

ST 36 is located about four fingers' width below the lower edge of the kneecap in the depression in the muscles outside the tibia (shinbone). (Figure 99.) If you press the point firmly, you may feel a sensation radiate down the leg to the top of the foot.

ST 36—Uses

- Energizes the lower limb.
- Relieves pain.
- Reduces swelling and pain of knee, ankle, and foot.

LI 10—Location

LI 10 is located about two fingers' width below the elbow crease. (Figure 100.) If you turn the palm down and make a fist, it is just behind the muscle that stands out below the elbow.

LI 10—Uses

- Energizes the upper limb.
- Relieves pain.
- Reduces swelling and pain in the elbow, wrist, and hand.
- Reduces shoulder pain.

Acupoints Really Work

Teachers are often humbled by their students. I am always amazed by students who take an introductory class and then use what they learned, often achieving better results than experienced practitioners. Years ago, I taught a twelve-hour course in sports medicine. After completing the class, one of my students was at his gymnastics class when a fellow student sprained her ankle. He didn’t have any liniments or poultices with him, but he remembered zu san li (ST 36). As he pressed the point, he watched the swelling literally shrink before his eyes. Acupuncturists learn many complex treatments and sophisticated techniques, yet often the most simple, direct treatments work the best. During the writing of this book, my left wrist and thumb began to ache from typing. I considered needling a number of acupuncture points on my wrist until I remembered my student’s simple treatment. I pressed and held shou san li (LI 10). Within less than a minute the pain began to ebb away, reminding me not to underestimate even the simplest of treatments.
THE LIMB GATE POINTS

Stomach 31 (ST 31)  Bi guan (thigh gate)
Small intestine 11 (SI 11)  Tian zong (celestial constellation)

Gate points are like floodgates in a dam. They open the meridians and release energy into the limbs from the torso. This clears blockages and restores the free circulation of qi and blood.

ST 31—Location
Trace a line from the pubic bone to the hip. The point is located in a depression just outside the sartorius muscle. (Figure 101.) This depression opens up when you bend the leg to sit cross-legged.

ST 31—Uses
- Releases energy from the torso into the leg.
- Alleviates pain in the thigh, hip, and leg.
- In conjunction with ST 36, energizes the lower limb.
- Stimulates to help prevent muscular atrophy of the leg (with ST 36).

SI 11—Location
SI 11 is located in a depression in the center of the shoulder blade. (Figure 102.) This point is usually quite sensitive to pressure.

SI 11—Uses
- Releases energy from the torso to the arm.

SHOULDER INJURY POINT

Triple heater 3 (TH 3)  Tian zong (central island)

TH 3—Location
On the back of the hand, between the bones, in the depression just behind the knuckles of the ring finger and the pinkie. (Figure 103.)

- Although SI 11 and LI 10 can also be used for shoulder injuries because of their energizing and energy-releasing effects, TH 3 is an effective point to treat shoulder pain and restricted movement in the shoulder.
- First press TH 3 on the same side as the injured shoulder. Then press TH 3 on the opposite side, while moving the shoulder in circles to increase range of motion. This works best if you can get someone else to press the point while you move your shoulder.

ANKLE INJURY POINT

Gallbladder 39 (GB 39)  Xuan zhong (suspended bell)

GB 39—Location
This point is located about three fingers’ width above the lateral malleolus (the big bump on the outside of the ankle). (Figure 104.) Locate it in the depression between the bones of the fibula and tibia.

- Alleviates pain in the shoulder blade, arm, and elbow.
- Helps heal tendonitis of the elbow and wrist.
- Stimulates to help prevent muscular atrophy of the arm (with LI 10).
- The number one point for injuries to the ankle or the outside of the foot.
- This point relieves pain and opens the meridians that supply energy to the ankle and foot.
- GB 39 is a key point in treating ankle sprain and is particularly effective if used with ST 31 and ST 36.

**Master Points**

Master points are acupoints that can be used to treat any problem in a specific area. They have a direct effect on the circulation of energy in the area they control.

**Master Point of the Face and Head**

Large intestine 4 (LI 4)  Hegu (connected valley)

This point is located in the center of the space between the thumb and index finger. (Figure 105.)

- LI 4 is one of the most versatile acupoints. It can be used for headaches, facial pain, toothaches, and pain in the front of the shoulder.
- Use with liver 3 (LIV 3), tai chiong (great thoroughfare) (Figure 106), to unblock all the meridians in the body and relieve pain and stagnation. This combination is also very effective for headaches.
- Do not apply heavy pressure to LI 4 if you are pregnant.

**Master Point of the Back**

Bladder 40 (BL 40)  Wei zhiong (bent middle)

This point is located on the center of the crease behind the knee. (Figure 107.)

- Press BL 40 to relieve any kind of back pain. For this purpose it is often used in conjunction with bladder 60 (BL 60), kun lun (kun lun mountains). (Figure 108.)

- BL 40 can also be used to relieve sciatica, pain behind the knee, and spasm of the calf muscle.

**SPECIAL HAND ACUPUNCTURES FOR PAIN RELIEF**

These are extra acupoints, not located on the main meridians, that are particularly useful for restoring pain and mobility to injured areas. Usually these points will be sensitive to pressure if there is pain in the related area. In general, the point that is more sensitive will be on the hand that is on the opposite side of the body from the injury. For example, if the right side of the back is more painful, the yao tong xue points on the left hand are more likely to be painful. For several minutes, press and hold the point while moving the injured area. The pain will often subside, and there should be increased mobility.
Luo Zhen—Stiff Neck Point
This point is located on the back of the hand, between the bones, in the depression behind the knuckles of the forefinger and the middle finger. (Figure 109.)

Yao Tong Xue—Lumbar Pain Points
There are two of these points, located on the back of the hand in the depression between the metacarpal bones, one between the metacarpal bones relating to the forefinger and middle finger and the other between the metacarpal bones relating to the ring and index finger. (Figure 110.)

Heel Pain Point
This point is located in the center of the heel of the palm, one finger's width above the wrist crease. (Figure 111.)

INFLUENTIAL POINT OF THE TENDONS AND LIGAMENTS
Gallbladder 34 (GB 34) Yang ling quan (yang mound spring)

GB 34—Location
This point is located in the depression just in front of and below the head of the fibula. (Figure 112.) The head of the fibula feels like a small knob of bone on the side of the leg a little below the knee. This point is slightly above and to the outside of ST 36.

GB 34—Uses
- Use to treat tendon ligament or cartilage injuries anywhere in the body.
- Particularly effective for tendon and ligament injuries to the knee, lower leg, and ankle.
- Use with GB 39 for ankle sprains.
- Combine with LIV3 to treat muscle spasms and cramps.
- GB 34 can be used with LIV3 to relieve the pain of fractured ribs.

RESPIRATION POINTS
Lung 5 (LU 5) Chi ze (ulnar depression)
Lung 6 (LU 6) Kong zui (gathering hole)

LU 5 and LU 6—Location
Lung 5 is in the elbow crease, just outside the tendon of the biceps. Lung 6 is in a depression on a line joining the base of the thumb to
LU 5, about two-thirds the distance from the wrist crease to the elbow crease. (Figure 113.)

**LU 5 and LU 6—Uses**
- Press these points and gently pinch the bicep tendon for a person who is out of breath or feeling faint from overexertion.
- Use before an athletic event to stimulate and open up the lungs.

**GROIN INJURY POINTS**

Kidney 2 (KID 2) Ran gu (blazing valley)
Spleen 4 (SP 4) Gong sun (grandfather grandson)

Figure 113.

**KID 2 and SP 4—Location**
Both points lie in the groove between the muscles of the arch of the foot and the bones on the inside of the foot. (Figure 114.)

**KID 2 and SP 4—Use**
Press firmly with your fingertip or knuckle to relieve pain from a blow to the groin or testicles.

**NAUSEA POINT**
Pericardium 6 (P 6) Nei guan (inner pass)

P 6 is well-known for its ability to quickly relieve feelings of nausea; however, it is a powerful point with many uses.

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**P 6—Location**
P 6 is located about two fingers’ width above the wrist crease between the two prominent tendons in the center of the wrist. (Figure 115.)

**P 6—Uses**
- Nausea.
- Seasickness.
- Morning sickness.
- Stomachache.
- Stuffy feeling in the chest.
- Hangovers.
- Wrist pain/carpal tunnel pain (press gently).

**Ear Acupressure**
Ancient Chinese medical texts make mention of acupuncture points in the ear, but ear acupuncture and acupressure, as we know it today, did not develop until the mid–twentieth century. The acupoints of the ear were mapped by European physicians trained in acupuncture and Chinese medical researchers who combined their clinical observations with electrical measurements of the different parts of the ear. Today their findings are taught in every acupuncture school in the world.

Ear points are often stimulated with needles. However, clinical studies have shown that pressure with a small probe such as a matchstick, or the taping of small seeds or metal beads on the ear points, is equally effective. In fact, “seed pressure” is considered by many to be more effective than acupuncture because it can produce virtually continuous stimulation, and unlike acupuncture, this therapy does not require extensive training to use safely and ef-
effectively. This is the method I consider most effective for treating sports injuries. Prepackaged press seeds or press pellets can be purchased from many Chinese pharmacies and acupuncture supply companies (see appendix 2).

The ear is a kind of microsystem of the whole body. (Figure 116.) In this system, the ear is considered to be like an upside-down fetus, the head being the earlobe and the feet being up at the top of the ear. The spine is rounded, mirroring the fetal position, and the internal organs are located in the center of the ear.

Ear acupressure can provide safe and effective treatment for a wide variety of sports injuries. Although over one hundred ear points have been cataloged and mapped, only a few key points and concepts are needed to treat most sports injuries. Ear acupoints for the treatment of sports injuries are divided into three categories:

**Body Area**

These are not so much points as areas of the ear that relate to areas of the body. (Figure 117.) In general, their positions conform to the microsystem idea of the upside-down fetus. Body area points work best if you can find a specific point within the area that is particularly sensitive to pressure. For example, for hip pain, look at the hip area of the ear shown in the following ear chart. Probe the hip area of one of your ears with the end of a matchstick or a small probe to determine if one point within that area is more sensitive to pressure than the others. If you cannot find a single point that is sensitive, try the other ear. It is necessary to find only one sensitive point in one ear. This more sensitive point is the one that should be stimulated. If more than one area of the body has been injured (for instance, the hip and the knee), probe both of the corresponding areas of the ear to find a sensitive point in each area.

**Specific Points That Relieve Pain and Calm the Spirit**

Two points (Figure 118) are particularly useful for relieving pain and calming the spirit, which is easily agitated by pain and injury. These points are

- shen men—calms the spirit.
- sympathetic—calms the nerves.
appropriate to the tissue that is injured. For a pulled muscle use the spleen point, for a sprained ankle the liver point, and for a bone bruise or broken bone use the kidney point. If a broken bone is accompanied by ligament damage, use both the liver and kidney points. If pulled muscles accompany a sprain, choose both the spleen and liver points. (Figure 119.)

Ear Points That Stimulate the Functioning of the Internal Organs

In chapter 2, I discussed the relationship between the internal organs and their associated issues. The healing of muscle, tendon, ligament, bone, and cartilage are dependent on the organs that supply them with fluids, blood, and nutrients. In Chinese sports medicine, three organs are considered to have direct connections with these tissues:

- Liver—tendon, ligament, cartilage.
- Spleen—flesh, muscles.
- Kidney—bones.

Like the body area points shown in figure 117, these “organ points” are not so much points as areas. Pick the point or points

STIMULATING EAR POINTS

A minimum of three ear acupoints will be stimulated:

1. the sensitive point corresponding to the body area injured.
2. shen men.
3. the sympathetic point.
To increase the effectiveness of the treatment, a fourth point that stimulates the organ associated with the injured tissue can be added:

4. spleen, liver, or kidney point(s).

These points need not be stimulated in both ears; one ear will suffice. Use the ear in which the point corresponding to the body area to be treated was the most sensitive to pressure. (See "Body Area.") The points can be stimulated with the end of the matchstick or with your finger by pressing for 20–30 seconds and then releasing for several seconds. Repeat 4 or 5 times.

A more effective method of stimulation is to tape seeds or press pellets on the ear acupoints. They are most easily applied and removed with tweezers. To stimulate, place your index finger on the front of your ear and your thumb on the back. Press continuously for 10–15 minutes while gently and carefully moving the injured area. Pain should gradually decrease and mobility should increase while you are pressing the seeds/pellets. If there is a fracture or suspected fracture, do not move the injured area while pressing the ear points. Just press the points to relieve the pain and stimulate healing. This stimulation can be repeated several times a day or whenever the area is painful. Ear pellets and ear seeds can be left on for several days at time. Ear acupoints can effectively relieve acute pain, but they may also be stimulated during the rehabilitation and healing process to help increase range of motion and guide the body’s healing energies to the injured area.