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Make headaches a thing of the past this year

Julia Charles and Clare Venters Smith of the Harrison Clinic explain how acupuncture can help to cure your headaches.

We all know that pain is a symptom telling us something is not right in our bodies and restoring balance is vital to recovery. It is this concept that's at the core of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which uses a combination of diet, acupuncture, herbs and massage therapies to treat different types of headache. However, before looking for treatment it's worth trying to understand the root cause of your particular headache; and reviewing your diet is a great place to start.

From a nutritional perspective, when assessing the cause of headaches the first place to look is hydration – 70% of headaches are due to a lack of pure water, and although this is a very simple fact, it's one which is often overlooked. An adult should be trying to drink approximately two litres of fresh water a day, more if you're exercising or working physically. If you're a frequent headache sufferer, try this before anything else. Aim for two litres a day for five days and see how your headaches improve, not to mention your energy levels and the ability to concentrate and think more clearly.

Secondly, food intolerance could be the cause. Much pain and inflammation in the body is created by the consumption of foods which are irritating us. By carrying out a simple, non-invasive food intolerance test, it's possible to easily and painlessly identify if headaches are being caused by something that's being eaten regularly.

Low and fluctuating blood sugar levels could be another cause, especially if you find that you're waking up with a headache. In general, if you feel that irregular blood sugar patterns are something you're suffering from, it would be worth eliminating all refined sugar, processed carbohydrates and sugary drinks from your diet. Hydrating well and eating complex carbs rather than white, refined alternatives should go a long way towards rebalancing blood sugars and hopefully eliminating these types of headaches.

Acupuncture is another approach to managing headaches. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence

(NICE) recently carried out extensive studies into the treatment and management of headaches and in September 2012 reported in their guidelines 'Diagnosis and Management of Headaches in Young People and Adults' that acupuncture is the only proven method to prevent tension-type headaches and migraine. In TCM, health is simply about having a balance of yin and yang and smooth flow of qi (energy), blood and body fluids. Headaches can arise from any imbalance or obstruction and acupuncture can be used to correct this imbalance and restore the smooth flow of substances.

Many people are put off trying acupuncture as they're concerned about the needles. However, they really are tiny; the fine, single use needles are so vastly different to those used by doctors to take blood or give injections – to give you some idea of how small acupuncture needles are consider this fact; you can fit 15 to 20 acupuncture needles inside one hypodermic needle. Patients at Harrison Clinic frequently fall asleep on the couch and are surprised that they feel no pain on insertion.

During treatment your practitioner will take a full case history to identify the underlying cause which is so important in acupuncture treatment – this holistic approach often results in other symptoms improving and patients gaining a feeling of overall improvement to their health.

It is interesting that NICE have identified the high incidence of tension headaches amongst women and the relationship with changes in hormones. 'Many of my patients note a relationship between their headaches and the menstrual cycle. It is great when after a few treatments they notice that not only have their headaches improved but they also find their pre-menstrual tension is reduced too,' explains Clare.

The most important thing is that headaches do not have to be part of your daily life – they are a sign that something is not quite right and you can take steps to alleviate them.

The Harrison Clinic, near Reading, offers a range of treatments from acupuncture to osteopathy, massage to nutritional therapy. Call **0118 976 2253** or visit www.harrisonclinic.co.uk to find out more.

