



WEIGHT LOSS / EATING HABITS

## Where Acupuncture and Weight Loss Meet

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The tail end of 2010 was big for weight-loss news. Just after Thanksgiving, Weight Watchers announced a revamp of its famous Points system, which now accounts for quality of foods rather than just caloric value. In early December, an FDA advisory committee voted to expand the indication for the Lap-Band device so that people with body mass indices between 30 and 35 can be eligible. And just a few days later, another advisory committee recommended approval of a new prescription diet pill, Contrave.

It's no surprise this news also comes on the heels of highly publicized alarming statistics - an estimated two-thirds of Americans are currently overweight, and one third of those are "obese" by carrying excess body fat to the extent where it has an adverse effect on overall health and life expectancy.

From diets to medical devices to drugs, weight-loss solutions abound--and yet consistently leave something to be desired.



For every Weight Watchers success story there's a case of backfire, in which Points counting becomes so tedious and joyless that it only increases cravings for off-the-charts foods. Similarly, the same Lap-Band that improves portion control in one person may be nothing but an ineffective and unnecessary surgical procedure for another. And Contrave, that new diet pill, was shown in a small trial to increase blood pressure and pulse rate, calling into question its safety--an issue that has plagued almost every diet drug to come before the FDA.

Different weight-loss methods produce unpredictable outcomes because we all gain weight, and struggle to lose it, for different reasons. Acupuncture by nature is multi-pronged in its approach--it simultaneously addresses physiological and emotional imbalances--making it an especially suitable therapy for complex conditions that are difficult to isolate.

And so, the \$64,000 question, the one acupuncturists field on a near-daily basis: can acupuncture really help with weight loss?

### All the Right Points

Ear points--usually some combination involving *shen men*, sympathetic, endocrine, hunger and stomach--are the best-known acupuncture approach to weight loss. The ear in acupuncture is a microcosm of the whole body, so ear points can be effective at treating conditions that involve multiple systems. The above-mentioned points, for example, address common issues in patients who are struggling to lose weight: *shen men* and sympathetic reduce anxiety and calm the nervous system; endocrine addresses potential hormone imbalances and affects metabolism; the hunger point curbs food cravings; and the stomach point targets one of the primary organs involved in digestion.

The story of acupuncture and weight loss, however, does not end at the ear.

Going back to some recent announcements: It's not surprising that Lap-Band surgery doesn't work for everyone. You can reduce someone's stomach capacity to the size of an acorn but that does nothing to affect his/her desire to eat. In the same way, Weight Watchers' Points system and support groups go a long way in addressing the emotional aspect of weight loss. But if a hormone imbalance is affecting appetite and metabolism, or a digestive disturbance is making it difficult to excrete waste, weight is unlikely to come off.

Acupuncture differs in that it considers the whole picture. However, not everyone's picture looks the same, which is why ear weight-loss protocols don't always work. There is usually an anxiety-related component to overeating, and often an addictive quality to that behavior. Depression leading to lethargy and lack of motivation to exercise may be involved as well. But why is the anxiety happening? Where is the depression or the hormone imbalance coming from? Although effective a large percentage of the time, ear points for weight loss are not always enough to get at the root of the problem. Fortunately, acupuncturists have additional tools at their disposal.

### Tips and Resources

One example of a non-ear approach to weight loss is found in "*Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine*," a fascinating and highly readable book by Wang Ju-Yi and Jason Robertson. The authors discuss body weight in relation to the *Shao Yang* system, which encompasses the Triple Burner and gallbladder organs and channels. They say, "*Shao yang* pathology revolves around the concept that,

when regulation is compromised, heat and *qi* become clumped in the interior." This "clumping" can manifest as excess weight.

As it relates to the topic of weight loss, the Triple Burner traditionally refers to three parts of the abdomen that regulate the environment surrounding the organs. (Those interested in a more detailed discussion of the Triple Burner should read Wang and Robertson's book.) With that in mind, the *Applied Channel* authors make the following clinical observation:

"The fact that the greater omentum (a part of the peritoneal lining that surrounds the organs) actually drapes over the lower abdomen and often has large deposits of fatty tissue provides insight into why the *shao yang* channel is important in the treatment of obesity."

The Triple Burner's role as a regulator and transformer means it also is important for metabolism, affecting the process of waste removal from the cells. Similarly, its paired organ and channel, the gallbladder, affects removal of waste through digestion. It "makes decisions" about what the body holds onto and what it excretes. *Applied Channel* discusses this in relation to Liver *Qi* stagnation, an extremely common pattern seen in acupuncture clinics:

"Many cases of liver *qi* stasis are actually related to a kind of yang deficiency. In these more deficient cases, there is often a corresponding gallbladder *qi* deficiency....The net result is a compromise of the decision-making function of the gallbladder in the digestive system....[causing] inefficient digestion. This may involve...over-absorption of foods, leading to ever-increasing weight gain."

This *Shao Yang* pathology is just one of many that can cause weight retention. But it exemplifies how acupuncture--in contrast to many more popular weight-loss options, for which outcomes are often temporary or altogether unsuccessful--addresses the underlying reasons for why someone may be having trouble losing weight.

Acupuncture can help with weight loss, but accurate diagnosis is critical, particularly in complicated cases for which ear protocols prove inadequate.

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