

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for acne vulgaris

This summary of key findings from *Volume 11: Acne vulgaris*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

- what acne vulgaris is
- current treatments
- findings from research into classical Chinese medicine literature and modern Chinese medicine clinical studies.

What is acne vulgaris?

Acne vulgaris is a common skin condition that appears as non-inflammatory lesions (blackheads and whiteheads) and inflammatory lesions (papules, pustules and nodules).² It is usually self-limiting,³ but many people experience multiple recurrences over many years.⁴ Acne can negatively affect mental health,⁵ even when acne is mild.⁶

Current treatments

Mild and moderate acne are managed with topical treatments.² Severe acne requires the use of topical treatments and oral antibiotics, or oral isotretinoin (a type of retinoid),² such as Roaccutane.

Chinese medicine treatment options include oral and topical Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, acupressure, and dietary and lifestyle advice. Chinese medicine practitioners base their treatments on the patient's symptoms, relevant clinical textbooks and guidelines, research and clinical experience.

Classical Chinese medicine literature

The *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Zhong Hua Yi Dian)* is a large and important collection of Chinese medicine books. It includes 458 citations that describe treatment of skin lesions that resemble acne vulgaris with Chinese

herbal medicine. Three-quarters of the citations that described Chinese herbal medicine contained topical formulas or herbs. None of the analysed citations described using acupuncture therapies to treat skin conditions like acne.

Three Chinese herbal medicine formulas found in the *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine* were also recommended in clinical textbooks and guidelines and tested in modern clinical studies: *Pi pa qing fei yin*, *Fang feng tong shen wan (san)* and *Liu wei di huang wan*.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Acne vulgaris*¹ monograph, nine biomedical databases (five English-language and four Chinese-language) were searched in May 2016. This search found 335 relevant studies of Chinese medicine for acne vulgaris, including 180 randomised controlled trials, 19 non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 136 non-controlled studies.

An additional search of the International Clinical Trials Registry Platform, conducted in May 2021 identified three new relevant registered randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine.

Chinese herbal medicine

Most studies (129) were randomised controlled trials of oral Chinese herbal medicine. Twenty-six studies were randomised controlled trials of topical Chinese herbal medicine.

Compared with oral antibiotics and other treatments, oral Chinese herbal medicine decreased the number of inflammatory lesions and increased the number of non-inflammatory (i.e. less severe) lesions. It also increased the chance of improving symptoms by 30% or more.

When used with conventional medicine, oral and topical Chinese herbal medicine reduced numbers of non-inflammatory and inflammatory lesions and increased chance of improving symptoms by 30% or more.

Fewer adverse events were reported in people who received Chinese herbal medicine than conventional medicine.

All three new registered randomised controlled trials tested Chinese herbal medicine. Oral Chinese herbal medicine was not more effective than placebo in reducing numbers of non-inflammatory and inflammatory lesions, and did not reduce acne severity. However, topical Chinese herbal medicine reduced acne severity and improved symptoms and health-related quality of life more than placebo.

Acupuncture and related therapies

The original database search found 10 relevant studies of acupuncture therapies for acne vulgaris. Five of these were randomised controlled trials. Results showed that acupuncture therapies increased the chance of improving symptoms by 30% or more compared with conventional medicine treatments.

No new relevant registered randomised controlled trials of acupuncture for acne vulgaris were identified since 2016.

Key messages

- Chinese medicine treatments have been used throughout history to treat acne-like skin conditions.
- Treatment approaches have evolved over time.
- Oral and topical Chinese herbal medicine may improve symptoms when used alone or with conventional medicines.
- Acupuncture may improve skin symptoms.
- Clinicians and patients should discuss the potential risks and benefits, so patients can make informed choices about their care.

For more information

You can find out more about Chinese medicine for acne vulgaris in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 11: Acne vulgaris*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/11054>

Find out more about Chinese medicine research at the China–Australia International Centre for Chinese Medicine at www.rmit.edu.au/research/centres-collaborations/multi-partner-collaborations/cairccm

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Disclaimer

This evidence summary is not intended as a guide for self-medication or medical advice – patients should seek professional advice from qualified Chinese medicine practitioners.