

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for episodic migraine

This summary of key findings from *Volume 23: Episodic Migraine*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

- what an episodic migraine is
- current treatments
- findings from research into classical Chinese medicine literature and modern Chinese medicine clinical studies.

What is an episodic migraine?

An episodic migraine is a common type of headache,² usually experienced by young females.³ Patients typically report a moderate-to-severe throbbing sensation on one side of their head, and nausea and vomiting. Episodic migraines occur repeatedly, but less than 15 days a month.² Migraine attacks can have many different triggers, such as stress, missing meals, eating certain foods, hormonal changes or not getting enough sleep.

Current treatments

Pharmacotherapy is the main treatment for relieving migraine pain and/or preventing migraines attacks.⁴ Non-pharmacological management, such as behavioural techniques, have been used to teach patients how to better cope with symptoms and identify potential migraine triggers.

Concerns around the effectiveness and safety of these clinical treatments have led some people to explore complementary medicine, including Chinese medicine.⁵

Chinese medicine treatment options for migraine include Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture. 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 178 citations that describe the treatment of migraine with Chinese herbal medicine. Acupuncture therapies were included in 10 citations.

Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture therapies for episodic migraine are similar in classical literature and modern clinical studies.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Episodic migraine*¹ monograph, nine biomedical databases (five English language and four Chinese language) were searched in March 2018. This search found 125 clinical studies of Chinese medicine therapies for episodic migraine. Most studies (118) were randomised controlled trials. An updated search of the International Clinical Trials Registry Platform in March 2023 identified five new registered randomised controlled trials of Chinese medicine therapies.

Chinese herbal medicine

Oral Chinese herbal medicine was tested in 63 of the randomised controlled trials: 61 tested it for preventing migraine, one tested it for treating acute migraine attacks and one tested it for both purposes.

Results showed oral Chinese herbal medicine was at least comparable to flunarizine (a first-line medicine) in preventing migraine.⁶ It was also more effective at preventing migraine attacks and reducing migraine severity than placebo. However, the superior effect didn't last long when treatment ceased.⁷

In addition, oral Chinese herbal medicine combined with conventional medicine

increased migraine prevention and reduced migraine severity. The effects of Chinese herbal medicine for treating acute migraine were inconclusive.

Some people in these trials reported mild gastrointestinal adverse events.

Results from the three new registered randomised controlled trials were consistent with those from the original database search.

Acupuncture and related therapies

Fifty randomised controlled trials evaluated acupuncture for episodic migraines. Of these, 39 tested acupuncture for preventing migraine, 10 for treating acute migraine attacks and one for both purposes.

Results showed that acupuncture alone or combined with conventional medicine was more effective than conventional medicine alone in preventing migraine attacks. The effect of acupuncture on managing acute migraine attacks was inconclusive.

Some people in these trials reported mild discomfort or minor bleeding in the needling area.

Of the two new registered randomised controlled trials on acupuncture, one evaluated acupuncture for preventing migraine and one evaluated it for treating acute migraine. Both showed acupuncture was more effective than sham control.

Key messages

- Chinese medicine treatments have been used throughout history to treat episodic migraine.
- Treatment approaches have evolved over time.
- Oral Chinese herbal medicine is effective for preventing episodic migraine attacks and reducing their severity, with mild gastrointestinal adverse events.
- Acupuncture is effective for preventing migraine attacks, with mild discomfort or minor bleeding.
- Clinicians and patients should discuss potential risks and benefits, so patients can make informed choices about care.

For more information

You can find out more about Chinese medicine for episodic migraine in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 23: Episodic Migraine*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/12197>

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

References

1. Zhang C S, LYU S. Episodic Migraine. World Scientific Publishing Company, 2021.
2. Headache Classification Committee Of The International Headache Society (IHS). The International Classification of Headache Disorders 3rd edition. Cephalalgia, 2018, Jan;38(1):1-211.
3. Safiri S, Pourfathi H, Eagan A, et al. Global, regional, and national burden of migraine in 204 countries and territories, 1990 to 2019. PAIN, 2022, 163(2).
4. Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN). Pharmacological management of migraine. 2018.
5. Rhee T G, Harris I M. Reasons for and perceived benefits of utilizing complementary and alternative medicine in U.S. adults with migraines/severe headaches. Complement Ther Clin Pract, 2018, 30: 44-9.
6. Lyu S, Zhang C S, Guo X, et al. Oral Chinese Herbal Medicine as Prophylactic Treatment for Episodic Migraine in Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials. Evid Based Complement Alternat Med, 2020.
7. Lyu S, Zhang C S, Guo X, et al. Efficacy and Safety of Oral Chinese Herbal Medicine for Migraine: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses Using Robust Variance Estimation Model. Front Neurol, 2022, 13.

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.