

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia

This summary of key findings from *Volume 6: Herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

- what herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia are
- current treatments
- findings from research into classical Chinese medicine literature and modern Chinese medicine clinical studies.

What are herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia?

Herpes zoster (shingles) is a skin rash that occurs when the chickenpox virus reactivates.² The rash appears as small, fluid-filled blisters, usually on one side of the body.³ Some people experience pain, tiredness and headaches before the rash.³ Blisters become ulcerated and scabs form in the week after the rash appears.⁴ It usually heals within four weeks.²

Post-herpetic neuralgia (nerve pain) is diagnosed when people experience ongoing pain (usually for three months or more) after the herpes zoster rash heals.⁵

Current treatments

People aged up to 50 years with normal immune function usually recover from herpes zoster without complication.² People older than 50 years and those with immune dysfunction may be given antiviral therapy to help healing.² A stepped-care approach is used to manage herpes zoster pain, starting with simple analgesics, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, and extending to stronger pain relief if the pain does not resolve.⁴

Post-herpetic neuralgia is usually treated with tricyclic antidepressants or anticonvulsants (e.g. gabapentin and pregabalin),⁵ which are effective treatments for chronic nerve pain.

Chinese medicine treatment options include oral and topical Chinese herbal medicine; body, ear and scalp acupuncture; moxibustion; magnetic therapy; plum-blossom needle therapy; cupping; 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 1,166 citations that describe using Chinese herbal medicine and, to a lesser extent, acupuncture therapies to treat herpes zoster-like skin lesions. Given the difficulties in locating citations for post-herpetic neuralgia (pain is a common symptom for many diseases), our search focused on acute herpes zoster.

Modified *Long dan xie gan tang*, modified *Chu shi wei ling tang*, acupuncture and moxibustion were the only Chinese medicine treatments for herpes zoster described in the *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, clinical textbooks and guidelines and in modern clinical studies.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia* monograph, five English-language and four Chinese-language biomedical databases were searched in May 2016. This search found 275 relevant studies of Chinese medicine for herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia: 183 randomised controlled trials, 10 non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 82 non-controlled studies.

The International Clinical Trials Registry Platform was also searched in May 2021. It identified three new relevant registered

randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine.

Chinese herbal medicine

Most studies were randomised controlled trials of oral Chinese herbal medicine for herpes zoster (95) or post-herpetic neuralgia (11).

For herpes zoster, Chinese herbal medicine combined with antiviral therapy was more effective than antiviral therapy alone in reducing the time for the rash and pain to resolve, scabs to form and no new lesions to develop. It also reduced incidence of post-herpetic neuralgia and increased symptom improvement. Numbers of adverse events were similar in people who received the combination therapy and only antiviral therapy.

For post-herpetic neuralgia, Chinese herbal medicine alone was as effective as conventional pain treatment in reducing pain scores and improving depressive symptoms, but when combined with conventional treatment, was more effective than them. People given Chinese herbal medicine reported fewer adverse events than people given conventional treatment.

No new relevant registered randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine for herpes zoster or post-herpetic neuralgia were identified since 2016.

Acupuncture and related therapies

The original database search found 61 relevant studies of acupuncture therapies for herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia. Of these, 34 were randomised controlled trials. Results showed the combination of acupuncture and moxibustion hastened pain resolution and the end of new lesions forming compared with antiviral therapy alone, and shortened the time for scabs to form. Acupuncture and moxibustion did not reduce the incidence of post-herpetic neuralgia.

One new relevant registered randomised controlled trial of moxibustion combined with scalp acupuncture or wrist–ankle acupuncture for herpes zoster was identified since 2016. It showed that the combination of moxibustion and scalp acupuncture was as effective as conventional antiviral therapy and pain medication in improving overall

symptoms, but the combination of moxibustion and wrist–ankle acupuncture was more effective. Neither combination reduced incidence of post-herpetic neuralgia more than conventional treatments.

Key messages

- Chinese medicine treatments have been used throughout history to treat herpes zoster-like skin conditions.
- Treatment approaches have evolved.
- Chinese herbal medicine may hasten rash healing and alleviate pain.
- Acupuncture plus moxibustion may improve rash healing and alleviate pain.
- Clinicians and patients should discuss potential risks and benefits, so patients can make informed choices about care.

For more information

Find out more about Chinese medicine for herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 6: Herpes zoster and post-herpetic neuralgia*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/10438>

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

References

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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.