

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for insomnia

This summary of key findings from *Volume 7: Insomnia*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

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

What is insomnia?

Insomnia is a common condition where someone has difficulty falling or staying asleep, and daytime symptoms such as irritability or fatigue. It also impairs daytime functioning, reduces productivity and can increase healthcare costs. As much as half of the population has occasional insomnia.²

Current treatments

Cognitive behavioural therapy is the first-line treatment for insomnia. Medicines, such as hypnotic agents, can also be used for short periods. However, hypnotic agents are associated with safety concerns, including morning sedation, anxiety, rebound insomnia, withdrawal, dependence, and altered sleep behaviours such as sleepwalking and sleep-related eating.²

Chinese medicine treatment options for insomnia include Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, ear acupuncture, herbal bathing, *qigong* and *tai chi*. 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 877 Chinese herbal medicine citations that describe the treatment of insomnia.

Acupuncture therapies were not found in citations related to an insomnia diagnosis. However, diet therapy, meditation using ancient Chinese philosophy and massage were described.

Chinese herbal medicine therapies for insomnia are similar in classical literature and modern clinical studies.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Insomnia*¹ monograph, nine biomedical databases (five English-language and four Chinese-language) were searched in May 2014. This search found 625 relevant studies of Chinese herbal medicine for insomnia, including 440 randomised controlled trials, 23 non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 162 non-controlled studies. An additional search of the databases was conducted in March 2021, which identified 18 new relevant registered randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine.

Chinese herbal medicine

Of the 270 randomised clinical trials that tested Chinese herbal medicine for insomnia, 207 tested Chinese herbal medicine alone and 63 tested Chinese herbal medicine combined with conventional medicine.

Chinese herbal medicine was more effective (alone or combined with conventional treatment) than benzodiazepine drugs in improving sleep quality, total sleep duration and sleep efficiency.³

Mild gastrointestinal adverse events were common among the people who participated in these trials.

Results from one new relevant registered randomised controlled trial of Chinese herbal medicine for insomnia showed no benefit or harm.

Acupuncture and related therapies

The original database search found 168 relevant studies of acupuncture therapies for insomnia. Of these, 97 were randomised controlled trials. Results from 30 randomised controlled trials of acupuncture for insomnia were published in a systematic review.⁴ This review suggested acupuncture may help to improve sleep quality in people with insomnia. Acupuncture appeared to be well-tolerated and unlikely to result in serious adverse events.

Thirteen new relevant registered randomised controlled trials of acupuncture for insomnia were identified in the 2021 search. Their results showed that acupuncture reduced insomnia severity and wake after sleep onset, and increased total sleep time and sleep efficiency. Furthermore, acupuncture reduced depression and anxiety.

Key messages

- Chinese medicine treatments have been used throughout history to treat insomnia.
- Chinese herbal medicine may improve sleep quality, sleep onset latency, total sleep duration and sleep efficiency.
- Acupuncture may be an effective treatment option for insomnia.
- 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 insomnia in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 7: Insomnia*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/10386>

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

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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.