

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for unipolar depression

This summary of key findings from *Volume 14: Unipolar depression*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

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

What is unipolar depression?

Unipolar depression (depression) is a common mental disorder. It is characterised by depressed mood and loss of interest in usual activities, leading to impairment in daily life.² Depression is a leading cause of disability worldwide. Depending on its symptoms and how much it impairs the person's daily life, depression can be classified as mild, moderate or severe.

Current treatments

For mild, moderate or severe depression, non-drug treatments include psychological and behavioural treatments (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy) and physical treatments (e.g. activity scheduling). For moderate and severe depression, antidepressant drugs are the first-line treatment. However, they are not recommended for mild depression, or for children or adolescents.³

Chinese medicine treatment options include Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, ear acupuncture 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 297 citations that describe the treatment of depressive symptoms with Chinese herbal medicine, including decoctions.

While the *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine* includes acupuncture and moxibustion therapies as treatment options for depression, they are much less frequently cited. The combination of herbal medicine and acupuncture was also cited.

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

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Unipolar depression*¹ monograph, nine biomedical databases (five English-language and four Chinese-language) were searched in September 2016. This search found 193 relevant studies of Chinese medicine for depression, including 166 randomised controlled trials, four non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 23 non-controlled studies. An additional search of the databases was conducted in October 2021, which identified one new relevant registered randomised controlled trial of Chinese herbal medicine.

Chinese herbal medicine

In the 104 randomised controlled trials looking at depression, oral Chinese herbal medicine was more effective than antidepressants in improving depression severity. Chinese herbal medicine combined with antidepressants also improved depression severity more than antidepressants alone.

In women with postpartum depression, studies showed Chinese herbal medicine reduced postpartum depression symptoms similar to antidepressants.⁴ For depression associated with perimenopause and menopause, studies also showed Chinese herbal medicine may reduce depression severity.⁵

Mild adverse events, such as dry mouth and/or gastrointestinal dysfunction, were common among the people who participated in these trials.

The new relevant registered randomised controlled trial of Chinese herbal medicine for depression showed Chinese herbal medicine was neither superior nor inferior to antidepressants.

Acupuncture and related therapies

The original database search found 56 relevant studies of acupuncture therapies for depression. Of these, 48 were randomised controlled trials.

Acupuncture used alone or with antidepressants has a similar effect to antidepressants alone at reducing depression severity.

Acupuncture may also reduce severity of depression associated with postpartum depression, perimenopause and menopause.^{3,4}

Three new relevant registered randomised controlled trials of acupuncture for depression were identified in the 2021 search. Their results showed acupuncture was more effective than placebo in improving depression scores. The combination of acupuncture and antidepressants also reduced depression severity compared to antidepressants alone.

Key messages

- Chinese medicine treatments have been used throughout history to treat depression.
- Chinese herbal medicine may reduce depression severity.
- Acupuncture may be an effective treatment option for depression.
- 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 unipolar depression in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 14: Unipolar depression*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/11435>

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.