

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for overweight and obesity in adults

This summary of key findings from *Volume 27: Overweight and obesity in adults*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

- what overweight and obesity are
- current treatments
- findings from research into classical Chinese medicine literature and modern Chinese medicine clinical studies.

What are overweight and obesity?

Overweight and obesity refer to increased body fat volume caused by genes, environment, energy intake, physical inactivity or a combination of these factors.¹ The body mass index (BMI; weight divided by height squared) in people who are overweight is between 25 and 29.9 kg/m², and people who are obese have a BMI of at least 30 kg/m². Being overweight or obese is associated with chronic diseases, such as diabetes, stroke, heart disease and some cancers.²

Current treatments

Conventional treatment involves a multi-component approach of reducing energy intake, increasing physical activity, and behavioural counselling to reduce weight and prevent further weight gain.² Medicines that suppress appetite, metabolise fat and regulate blood sugar levels may be added to these lifestyle changes.³ Surgery to reduce the size of the stomach, and therefore energy intake, may be considered for people who are obese.

Chinese medicine treatment options for overweight and obesity include Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, cupping, *tuina* (Chinese massage), diet and lifestyle modification, and *qigong*. Chinese

medicine practitioners use clinical textbooks and guidelines and consult research before determining the most appropriate treatment for each patient.

Classical Chinese medicine literature

The *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Zhong Hua Yi Dian)* is one of the largest collections of historical Chinese medicine books. All 306 citations that described treatments for excessive body weight related to Chinese herbal medicine. Many citations also described treatment for being overweight combined with other conditions, such as diabetes and stroke.

Chinese medicine treatment of overweight and obesity has changed over time. None of the Chinese herbal medicine formulas that were mentioned in classical textbooks are included in contemporary clinical guidelines and textbooks.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

Five English-language and four Chinese-language biomedical databases were searched in November 2018 to write the *Overweight and obesity in adults*¹ monograph. The search found 476 relevant clinical studies, including 341 randomised controlled trials, 22 non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 113 non-controlled studies.

Chinese herbal medicine

Most studies (195) were randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine. Chinese herbal medicine was no different to placebo or diet therapy in its effects on weight, BMI and waist circumference. Chinese herbal medicine reduced BMI, but not waist circumference, more than conventional medicines.

Combining Chinese herbal medicine with lifestyle therapies reduced BMI and waist circumference, but not weight, more than placebo combined with lifestyle therapies. This combination was also more effective than lifestyle therapies alone in reducing weight, BMI, waist circumference and percentage of body fat. However, the combination was not more effective than conventional medicines in reducing weight, BMI and waist circumference.

Combining Chinese herbal medicine with conventional medicines reduced BMI and waist circumference more than conventional medicines alone, but did not reduce weight. Finally, combining Chinese herbal medicine with conventional medicines and lifestyle therapies reduced weight, BMI and waist circumference more than just conventional medicines combined with lifestyle therapies.

There were fewer side effects with Chinese herbal medicine than with other treatments. Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, stomach ache, vomiting and diarrhoea, were the most reported side effects. Symptoms were usually mild and did not require treatment.

Acupuncture therapies

Acupuncture therapies were tested in 107 randomised controlled trials. Acupuncture was more effective than sham acupuncture in reducing weight, BMI and waist circumference. A similar result was observed when acupuncture was combined with lifestyle therapies, but this combination did not reduce the percentage of body fat.

Combining ear acupuncture with lifestyle therapies reduced BMI more than lifestyle therapies alone. However, combining body and ear acupuncture with lifestyle therapies did not reduce weight and BMI more than lifestyle therapies alone.

Acupuncture can have side effects like pain, bleeding and bruising, but the side effects in these studies were usually mild and resolved without treatment.

Key messages

- Chinese herbal medicine has a long history of use for weight management.
- Chinese herbal medicine used alone or combined with lifestyle therapies or medicines may improve some measures of overweight and obesity.
- Combining acupuncture with lifestyle changes may reduce weight and BMI.
- Chinese medicine treatments have side effects that practitioners should discuss with patients when they are developing a patient-centred treatment plan.

For more information

Find out more about Chinese medicine for overweight and obesity in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 27: Overweight and obesity in adults*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/12967>

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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2. Jensen MD, et al. (2014) 2013 AHA/ACC/TOS guideline for the management of overweight and obesity in adults: A report of the American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association Task Force on Practice Guidelines and The Obesity Society. *Circulation*. 129(25 Suppl 2): S102–S138.
3. National Health and Medical Research Council. (2013) Clinical practice guidelines for the management of overweight and obesity in adults, adolescents and children in Australia. National Health and Medical Research Council, Melbourne.

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.