

Irregular Periods Treated with Body and Scalp Acupuncture: A Case Report

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Abstract

This article presents a report of the acupuncture treatment of a 39 year-old female who presented with irregular periods after stopping the contraceptive pill. She received nine treatments with body and scalp acupuncture over a four-week period. The patient showed a good response to the acupuncture treatment, which improved both the quality and regularity of her menstrual bleeding.

Case history

A 39-year-old female presented in clinic complaining of irregular menstruation. She had been taking the oral contraceptive pill for over one year since her periods returned three months after having her second child. However, since stopping this in November 2016, her periods became irregular. She had periods in December 2016, April 2017 and July 2017; they were preceded by a descending pain in the lower abdomen, and the scanty, brownish blood was accompanied by a dragging sensation. She experienced irritability before the periods and felt generally stressed. Her periods had started at age 13 and her menstrual cycle had previously been fairly normal: twenty-eight days long with bleeding that lasted four to five days and an average blood volume, without clots or pain.

and passed regular, well-formed stools. She liked to drink room temperature water and hot tea. She slept six to seven hours a night. She had two pregnancies and two live births. She rated her overall energy level at six out of ten, with a tendency to fatigue. Mentally and emotionally she felt stable, although she found her work as an attorney stressful. She liked to swim and work out. Her diet was healthy, with one or two cups of coffee in the morning, social alcohol consumption, but no tobacco or recreational drugs.

The patient was five foot three inches and weighed 125 pounds. Her demeanour at the consultation was calm and quiet, and she seemed committed to do whatever was needed to improve her menstrual cycle. Her pulse was weak and thin at the chi (proximal) position on both sides, and her tongue was pink without coating.

Diagnosis

The main TCM disease categories in this case were yue jing xian hou wu ding qi (irregular cycle with periods that come early or late) and jing luan (chaotic periods). In terms of pattern differentiation, there were four main patterns. The first was Liver blood deficiency, as evidenced by the scanty periods and tiredness. The second pattern was Liver qi stagnation, presenting as irregular periods, premenstrual tension and irritability. The third pattern was Kidney yin deficiency, evidenced by lower back pain, vaginal dryness, hot flushes, tongue without coating and weak pulse on both chi positions. The fourth pattern was blood stasis, manifesting as scanty periods with dark, brownish blood, missed periods and pain in the abdomen before the period.

“She started experiencing hot flushes and sweating on her back and forehead ...”

In summer 2017, she started experiencing hot flushes and sweating on her back and forehead three or four times a day. Her vagina also became dry and uncomfortable, although without itchiness. She reported that her sleep was sometimes restless, and complained of occasional headaches, fatigue, low back pain and restlessness, although these symptoms did not bother her as much as the irregular periods. She had received laser surgery to correct her vision in 2008, and in March of 2017 she had surgery on her eyelids (blepharoplasty). She reported feeling warm overall, had a good appetite

Points	Actions
Zusanli ST-36	Tonify qi, nourish blood
Sanyinjiao SP-6	Invigorate blood, tonify Kidney yin, harmonise lower jiao, regulate uterus and menstruation, move the blood and eliminate stasis
Qihai REN-6	Move qi in lower abdomen
Guanyuan REN-4	Invigorate blood, strengthen the uterus, tonify Kidney yin
Taixi KID-3	Tonify Kidney yin
Zhongji REN-3	Benefit the uterus, regulate menstruation, benefit the lower jiao, fortify the Kidney
Daimai GB-26	Regulate menstruation
Lower Jiao on the scalp - three parallel needles	Regulate menstruation, treat lower back pain
Shenting DU-24	Calm the spirit
Taichong LIV-3	Regulate menstruation, invigorate blood in the uterus, promote the smooth flow of liver qi

Table 1: Acupuncture point selection and actions

Treatment

The initial course of treatment involved nine visits over a four-week period, approximately twice a week. The treatment principles were tranquilising the mind, supplementing qi and nourishing blood, tonifying Kidney yin, eliminating blood stasis, smoothing the Liver, moving qi and regulating the period.

Body acupuncture was delivered using 32 gauge, 30 millimetre DBC brand needles with guide tubes. All points were stimulated until a sensation of deqi was evoked. Reinforcing technique was applied by inserting the needle slowly and withdrawing it rapidly. Scalp acupuncture was delivered with 36 gauge, 20 millimetre Zhu's scalp acupuncture needles without tube guide, and a tonifying technique was applied by lifting and thrusting with a small amplitude. The needles were retained for 45 minutes and stimulated every five minutes for 20 seconds.

Results

After the course of treatment the patient had a period in September 2017 that lasted for three days and was scanty and brownish. In October 2017, she had a more normal period that lasted for four to five days, with a moderate amount of blood that was red in the beginning and pinkish at the end. She reported decreased hot flushes (to a once a week), less vaginal dryness and felt more relaxed. Follow-up was continued for another two months by email, during which she reported normal monthly periods continuation of the other improvements.

Discussion

Irregular periods can involve various biomedical pathologies. Absence of menses for three consecutive months in females who have passed menarche is called secondary amenorrhoea. The causes of secondary amenorrhoea include pregnancy, uterine causes, premature ovarian failure (POF), hypothalamic-pituitary causes and menopause. Premature ovarian failure (or premature menopause) affects one per cent of women

under the age 40;¹ most women present with irregular periods or no periods at all, with or without climacteric symptoms.² Taking the contraceptive pill can cause POF, and while most women will return to normal ovulation after they stop taking contraceptive, some women do not.³ At menopause hormone levels in the body change and the decline in oestrogen is associated with osteoporosis and urogenital atrophy; atrophic vaginitis may result in unpleasant dryness, discharge and pain during intercourse.

Traditional Chinese medicine

According to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theory, the Kidney is the origin of tian gui, which governs the onset of the menstrual cycle and fertility.⁴ Menstrual blood is viewed as a precious fluid that originates from Kidney essence;⁴ if this is deficient, menstrual blood dries up. Deficiency of Kidney-essence leads to malnourishment of the uterus and the Penetrating (Chong) and Conception (Ren) Vessels.⁶ Post-natal qi and blood produced by the Stomach and Spleen (secondary) also have a role in producing menstrual blood, and if deficient can lead to menstrual irregularity. The lower abdomen contains the uterus, which stores blood and is connected to the Kidney via the uterus channel (bao luo) and to the Heart via the uterus vessel (bao mai).⁴ The Liver stores the blood and Liver qi moves blood. When Liver qi stagnates, it causes irregular periods and/or dysmenorrhoea. If Liver blood is deficient it can cause amenorrhoea, scanty or delayed periods. In TCM terms the aetiology of amenorrhoea includes inadequate production of blood, Liver and Kidney deficiency leading to exhaustion of blood and blood stasis in the channels and vessels of the uterus.⁵ From a TCM perspective, long-term use of the contraceptive pill can cause blood deficiency and/or blood stasis.

Research

A pilot study on the effect of acupuncture treatment on POF in 2014 in China, whilst not conclusive, suggested

positive therapeutic effects.⁵ Another study of the acupuncture treatment of amenorrhoea due to prolonged intake of oral contraceptives was similarly encouraging:⁶ A total of 215 cases were randomly allocated to a treatment group, who received acupuncture, or a control group treated with hormonal drugs. The results showed that after hormonal treatment was withdrawn, the amenorrhoea returned. Acupuncture treatment was found to regulate the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovary axis, and after the treatment the symptoms did not come back. Also, the acupuncture treatment did not show side effects. Another observational study was conducted in China between 1990-1996 in which acupuncture was given to 151 patients with POF aged from 26 to 40 years with histories of amenorrhoea up to nine years in duration.⁷ The subjects were randomly divided into an acupuncture group and a control group who were treated with orthodox medicine. The results showed an effective rate of 68.42 per cent in the acupuncture treatment group versus 28 per cent in the control group. Modern research into acupuncture mechanisms has shown that it may influence the flow of blood⁸ and regulate endocrine activity.⁵

It is likely that acupuncture treatment made a significant impact on regulating this patient's menstrual cycle.

Conclusion

Given a history of irregular periods, hot flashes and vaginal dryness in vagina of almost one year, it is likely that acupuncture treatment made a significant impact on regulating this patient's menstrual cycle. According to the literature, irregular periods can be difficult to treat.⁴ The factors that contributed to the success of this case were likely to be that the patient was compliant with her twice weekly treatment (since she wanted to avoid drug therapy) and responded to advice to take care of her emotional life, avoid overwork, take proper rest, eat a good diet and exercise regularly. In this case, body acupuncture combined with scalp acupuncture seemed to be an effective treatment for irregular periods. However, further carefully designed studies are needed to better determine this effect.

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