



CHAPTER 3

ACUPRESSURE ACTION - FIRST AID TO ALLEVIATE HEADACHES

WHAT IS ACUPRESSURE?

Acupressure is a treatment method developed thousands of years ago that uses hand pressure to specific tender points throughout the body to achieve relief of various afflictions, including headaches. More than simple massage to the muscles in the head and neck, acupressure

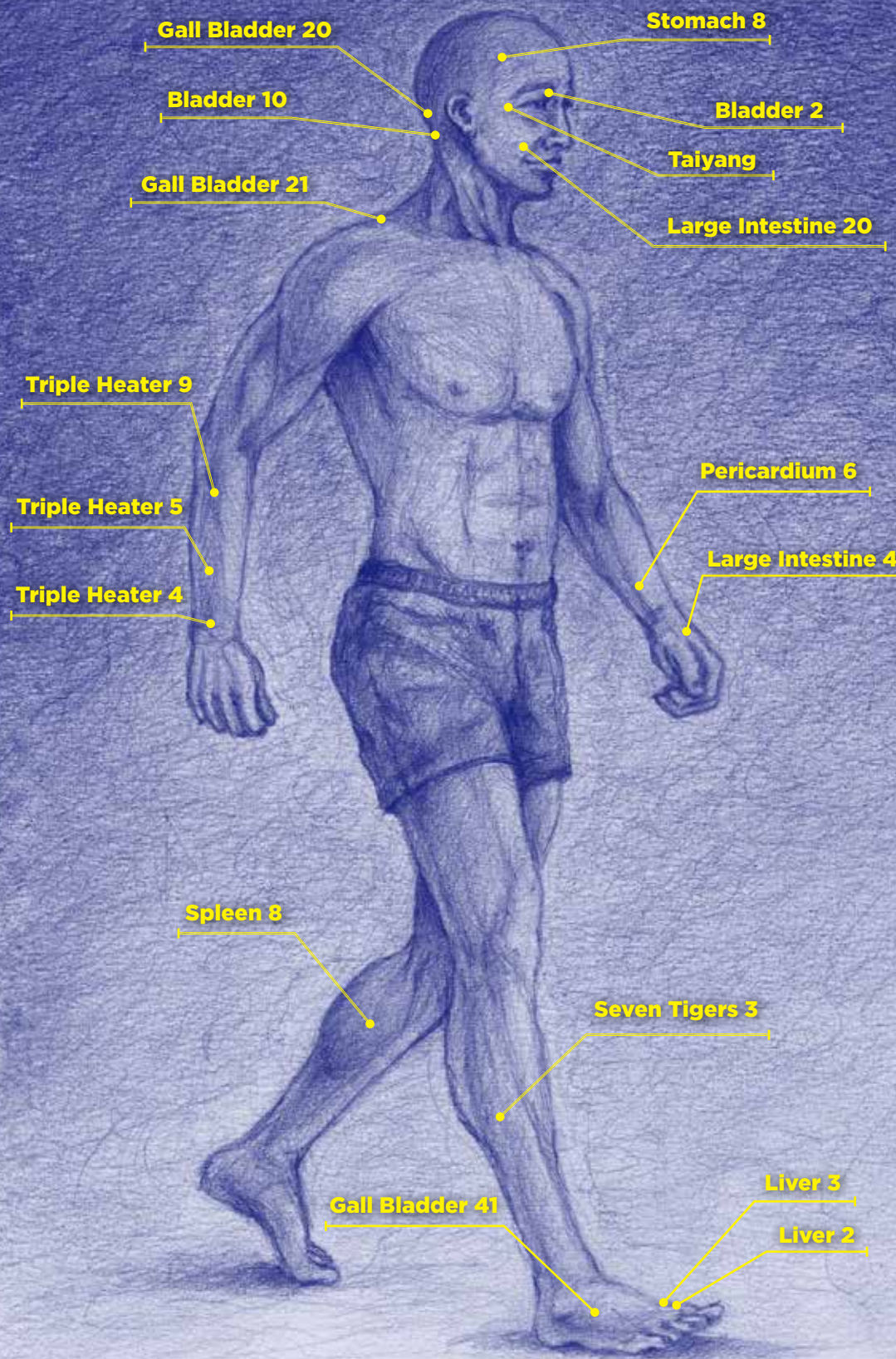
works to relieve headaches by pressing points that are located far away from the area of the pain, with effective headache points found even in the hands and feet. Pressure to these points can often relieve headache pain in less than a minute.

The Chinese word for acupuncture point is “*cave*” or “*hollow*”, and most of the points are located in such depressions in the body. Acupressure points and acupuncture points are identical. However, acupressure can be used as a self-help technique, with people learning how to relieve their own headaches by applying pressure to their own personal relief points. Acupuncture is also effective, but a professional is needed to insert tiny needles into these specific points.

Acupuncture points are found just below the surface of the skin, about 1/10 inch deep and 1/10 inch in diameter. About 600 to 1,000 acupuncture points exist in the body, yet less than fifty are used to treat most headaches. Acupuncture points are often close to the major nerve branches in the body, and may be quite tender. Stimulating the points with acupressure or acupuncture can also stimulate the nerves that travel in a complicated network throughout the entire body. Why certain points can affect the specific areas far away from the pressure is still not determined. However, the fact that these effects occur has been documented over thousands of years. Not everyone will have exactly the same response to stimulation of these points, just as medications can affect people differently. For further information, there are several excellent resources that sum up some of the key points used for treating various afflictions.¹⁻⁶

HOW DOES ACUPRESSURE AND ACUPUNCTURE WORK?

The traditional basis of the acupuncture model, used in China for 4,000 years, is the belief that energy pathways exist in twelve main longitudinal meridians along the body. Energy flows along these meridian pathways in predictable cycles, and various points along these meridians become sensitive to different bodily dysfunctions.



The acupressure point diagram on the preceding page displays the headache relief points that I have found most useful after my 30 years as a physical therapist. Each meridian was named for an organ that it passed through. The headache relief points lie along these meridians and will be labeled according to the standard Chinese naming system that has been used for thousands of years. The organ that the point is named after has nothing whatsoever to do with the headache relief from stimulating that point.

The scientific physiological basis for acupuncture has been studied for decades. These studies seem to apply to acupressure as well. One finding is that acupuncture causes a release of endorphins, which are pain-killing chemicals released from the brain that have a morphine-like effect on pain. However, since acupuncture also treats asthma, diabetes, smoking cessation, high blood pressure and other conditions that do not involve pain reduction, other mechanisms besides opiate receptors are likely involved. For a more complete understanding on the scientific theory of acupuncture effectiveness, read the work of Dr. George Ulett in his book "Beyond Yin and Yang; How Acupuncture Really Works."⁶

The pain-relieving, or analgesic, effect of acupuncture may burn out completely if continued for six hours.⁷ This effect is much like pharmaceutical medications that require larger and larger doses to achieve the same result with continued use over time. I observed this phenomenon long ago with some clients in the clinic, where the initial effectiveness they received lessened with overuse of the points. Therefore, it is best to use acupuncture and acupressure points intermittently, not continuously. I now advise my clients to use the points only as "first aid" and to not rely on them as the mainstay of their treatment.

Some people respond to acupuncture and acupressure better than others. Dr. Ulett noted that about a third of people do not have the receptors in the brain that allow the acupuncture to have an effect. While the presence of people's brain receptors can not be tested, a practical means to determine if acupressure works is for people to apply pressure to the points displayed on the acupressure diagram. People who do not have tenderness in any of the acupressure points are likely not going to benefit from acupressure.



ACUPUNCTURE / ACUPRESSURE RESEARCH

DOES ACUPUNCTURE AND ACUPRESSURE WORK?

Researchers are divided, with some finding real improvement in headaches⁸⁻²⁴ while other researchers saw no benefit.²⁵⁻³⁰ Several researchers noted that there was no consistency in the points that were used in the studies, which made accurate comparison difficult.³¹⁻³² The studies were done primarily on acupuncture, but there was no clear explanation as to why certain headache relief points were selected and others were not. I noted that many of the studies did not use some of the best acupuncture/acupressure points for headache relief. The people may have received relief if additional points had been used.

Researchers differ on whether the headache relief comes from a specific physical mechanism or whether the relief is due to psychological placebo. An answer can be determined easily enough in several minutes. In the clinic, an initial point may not affect a person's headache. That person is then psychologically prepared to doubt that acupressure works. When another, more effective point for that person's headache is used, resulting in immediate relief, it becomes obvious that the headache relief was point-specific. The person had no reason to believe the second point would work, and yet, it did.

Another method to discount a placebo effect is when neck motions are measured. A client may have limited mobility in neck turning. After a

point for neck pain is applied, such as the point Sp 8 in the calf or TH 4 in the wrist, the client finds that the neck suddenly turns further and more freely. The placebo effect can again be discounted.

Different people find some points work better for them than others. The astonishment on the faces of those people not expecting relief when a point in the arm or leg relieves their headache pressure verifies that these points that have been used for over 4,000 years do have a physical reason for their success.

HOW CAN YOU USE ACUPRESSURE TO HELP YOURSELF?

When doing self-acupressure, find a contour or ridge of bone that the acupuncture point lies near. You must push against the bone to get the firm and constant pressure required. Press with your fingers, knuckles, thumbs, hand-held ball, or various objects to stimulate the acupressure point. A useful technique to add pressure and stability is to place your index finger on the appropriate point and lay your middle finger over the index finger to reinforce it. Generally, the more tender the point, the greater the likelihood of success.



Finger placement

There will be no doubt when you hit the proper point, since the pain will be sharp. The target point being pressed is more sensitive than the surrounding area. Sensitivity to these points varies from person to

person, so the appropriate amount of pressure must be gauged. With experience, you will learn to “feel” the acupressure points, which will be slightly swollen and tender, especially if the affliction is severe.

To relieve headache pain with acupressure, try the method below:

- Slowly move your index finger or thumb in a very small circle at the site of the target acupuncture point. Move your finger in small circles to make sure that constant stimulation to the point is maintained. The reason for the circular pattern is that your finger may easily miss the point if held stationary on the wrong point. Pressure to the exact point must be applied or the treatment is useless. A common mistake is to rush and not allow enough time at the point.
- Maintain enough pressure to cause some pain at this point, but be cautious to avoid intense pain when pressing. Aim for a “good hurt,” which means the target point being pressed will be more sensitive than the surrounding area, without being excruciating.
- The duration of the pressure varies. Stay on each point for 10 to 60 seconds to see if it will provide relief. Generally, less than 30 seconds is enough to feel the headache start to fade away. For more sensitive points, a constant pressure for one minute could be intolerable, so apply pressure for 10 seconds, then ease up for 5 seconds, and reapply pressure again.
- If no relief is obtained, move to another point. The number of effective headache points are limited, so use the point summary in this chapter to decide which points to use.
- Do not let your fingernails dig in to the skin.

Headaches caused by muscle tension in the forehead, neck, and upper shoulder muscles respond dramatically pressing these points, totally relieving the headaches of some people. Success for other people may be to rid themselves of the sharper edge of their headache pain, yet still have a leftover vague sense of pressure in the head. The pressure points are most helpful to calm the headaches in the mild to moderate stage before the headache escalates to a severe, unbearable level.

People make common mistakes when using acupressure for the first time. Most people start by trying to go too rapidly when seeking out the acupressure point. They may overshoot the point entirely, as many points are hidden underneath the skin next to a bony surface. Slow down and do not rush. The acupressure point will make itself known as your finger or thumb passes over it. It is not going anywhere. If a person remembers to move the finger or thumb in small circles, the point will be hit. As a person becomes more experienced at finding the point, one can then discard the circle method if it is no longer necessary.

How do you know what point to hit first? Start with either the head points or the point called Large Intestine 4, which is located in the web space between the first and second finger. This point is also useful to test if you are sensitive to acupressure points. Anecdotally, if you are not tender at this point or several of the head points, acupressure treatment is not likely to have much impact on your headache.



Large Intestine 4

Once you master how to find points in the head, proceed into the arm and leg points. Some people actually find more rapid and complete relief with several of the foot and calf points than they do with points closer to the head.

Use the headache points early in the headache episode, before the headache intensity ramps up. If the point is useful, a sensation of decreasing headache pressure will occur. Do not rely exclusively on acupressure but include complementary exercise techniques. Sometimes the relief from the points lasts only while the pressure is maintained. At other times the pressure points work like a medication and provide several hours of relief before wearing off. A person can get headache relief from more than one point, but once a point provides good relief, adding other points usually does not add extra relief.

Acupressure points on either side of the body can be effective. Treating the side of the pain generally works best, but some nerve pathways cross at the spinal cord, so a person's headache on the right side of the head can get excellent relief by treating the left sided points. Headache clients, for example, have found it a strange sensation indeed when pressure to the point in the web space between the left thumb and index finger lifts the headache pain off the right side of their head.

If you have increasing nausea that warns you of an oncoming headache, you can calm your nausea by pressing an excellent point called Pericardium 6, which is in the front of the forearm by the wrist and is shown in the following photographs. If this point can be pressed early enough, it can stave off both the nausea and the headache that would normally follow. Also, since 40 percent of migraine sufferers have neck pain preceding their headaches, neck pain relief points are also included in this chapter. The key to stopping the headaches is to use the points early before the headache escalates. Once the headache is full-blown, the acupressure points are typically not going to have as much of an effect.

Since there are hundreds of acupuncture and acupressure points, it was important for me to learn how to sort through them to find the best points for headache relief. I had a unique opportunity to expand my understanding of acupressure and acupuncture through the teaching of

acupuncture expert Dr. Zhang in Shanghai, China, in 1996. Dr. Zhang treated workers and their families at the Shanghai Chinese Chrysler automobile parts factory. I observed the dramatic improvement of patients with back pain, shoulder pain, benign prostate hypertrophy, deafness and even blindness. For example, a 76-year-old female patient of Dr. Zhang stated she had been told by three Shanghai doctors that there was nothing they could do to stop her developing blindness. Despite the pessimistic prognosis, she reported enthusiastically of her spectacular vision improvement following Dr. Zhang's acupuncture treatments.

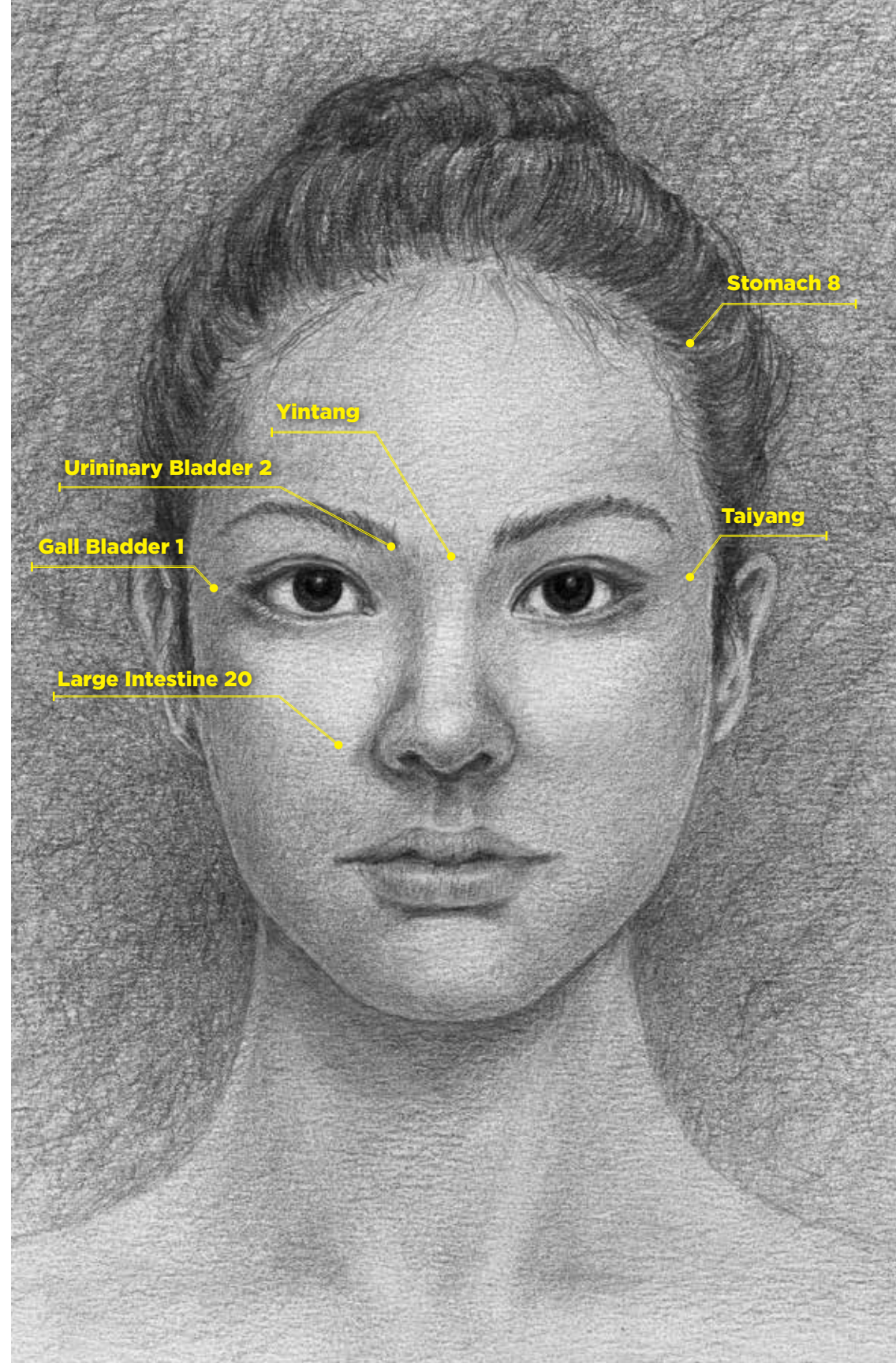
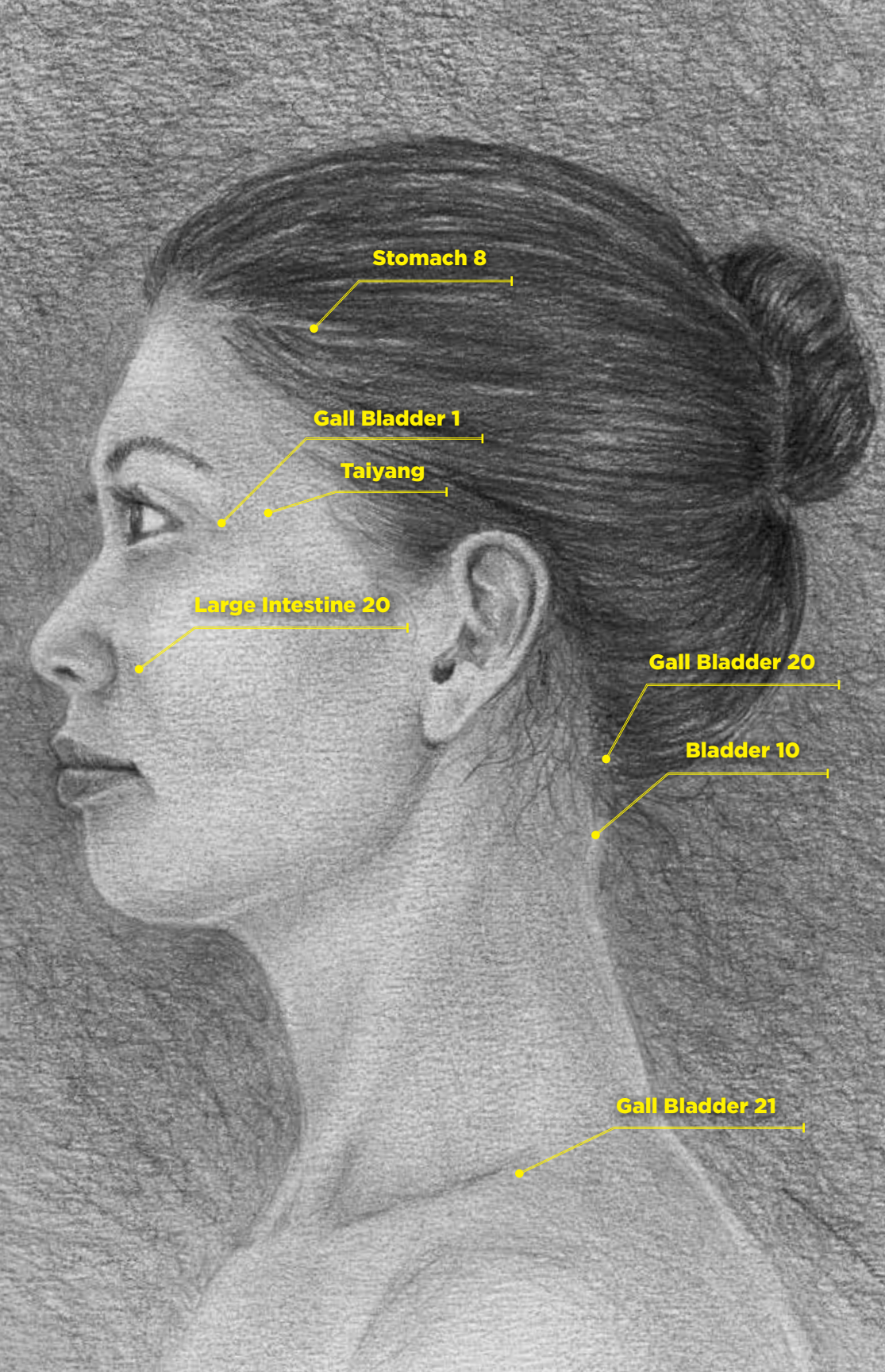
Acupressure, Dr. Zhang stated, can work better than acupuncture. Why might this be? When the points are near the surface of the body, acupressure hits more points simultaneously than can be done with acupuncture needles. Since most of the headache points are close to the surface of the body they can be easily reached with acupressure. However, points deep in the thigh or the back are best reached with acupuncture needles.

WHEN TO AVOID ACUPUNCTURE AND ACUPRESSURE

It is important to avoid acupuncture and acupressure if one is pregnant, as there is a possibility, while slight, that the acupuncture points could cause a miscarriage. These questionable points are mostly in the legs, but there are several in the arms as well. I have personally not heard of anyone having acupuncture points result in miscarriage or induce labor. Nevertheless, I believe in safety above all else, so discretion is advised. Use acupressure only in consultation with your doctor.

Do not apply acupressure to any tumor, open wound, bone fracture, bruise, swollen extremity, blood vessel or lymph node. People who are on blood thinner medication should be careful to not press too hard on the acupressure point because of their increased risk for bruising.

Headaches caused by flu or general systemic diseases will not be relieved with acupressure. The pressure points may provide relief while pressure is applied, but then return immediately after the pressure is lifted.



ACUPRESSURE HEADACHE RELIEF POINTS

The photographs will show how to apply pressure to each point and what specific area of the head will most likely get relief from that particular point. Some of the points work better for different areas of the head, though some overlap can be expected. Use a standard walking cane or a special curved cane (Theracane) for hard to reach points. Use a baseball, softball, or tennis ball to apply pressure to the points in the back of your neck. Use pillows behind your head to get the proper support while pressure is being applied. Hold pressure for 30 to 60 seconds. *These activities may be harmful if done incorrectly, so please use caution and work with your licensed healthcare provider before attempting.*

HEAD POINTS

For the back and side of the head, try these points:

- Gall Bladder 20 (GB 20) is found in the back part of your neck, where your neck meets your head. Use your thumb, or put your third finger over your index finger to apply pressure.



Gall Bladder 20



Theracane to assist with pressure



Softball to assist with pressure (Gall Bladder 20 and Bladder 10) or use a tennis ball for lighter pressure.

- Bladder 10 (BL 10) is located just inward and diagonally from the Gall Bladder 20 point, on the outside part of your upper trapezius muscle, about one-third down your neck. Use second and third fingers held tightly together.



Bladder 10



Theracane to assist with pressure

- Gall Bladder 21 (GB 21) is located between the tip of the shoulder and the nape of the neck on a muscle called the upper trapezius. This point also relieves tension headaches. Use all of the fingers to massage this point, or the handle end of a curved cane can be used to apply sustained pressure.



CAUTION: Do not attempt acupuncture to yourself. Seek out a credentialed acupuncturist. The photos in this chapter depict a pointer, not a needle, to help you see where the exact location of the acupoint is.



Gall Bladder 21

The following points help headaches in the front of the head. They also can relieve the pressure from sinus headaches. In the case of a sinus headache, a sensation of pressure lifting off the sinuses can be felt immediately after pressing these points.

- Large Intestine 20 (LI 20) can help to drain stuffed sinuses and relieve the headache pressure. This point is aptly named “welcome fragrance” in Chinese for its sinus draining effect. The point for sinus headaches is located underneath the cheekbone about two thumb widths away from your nostril. People feel a relief of pressure behind the sinuses when this point is stimulated. Make sure you do not push directly down on the point, as you want to hit it with your thumb pushing diagonally upwards at about a 30-degree angle under the cheekbone. People frequently do not go deep enough under the cheekbone, and need to get further underneath the cheekbone. An easy way to hit both sinus points simultaneously is to lean forward while sitting, with elbows on the thighs and push in diagonally up into the cheekbone with the thumbs.



Large Intestine 20



Large Intestine 20

- Bladder 2 (BL2) is in the upper orbit of the eye towards the bridge of the nose. Use your thumb pushing upwards to avoid the eye itself. Never push on your eye directly!

*Bladder 2*

- Yin tang, is at a point at the top of the nose bridge, centered between both eyes. Thumb pressure works best here.

*Yin Tang*

- Taiyang, or extra point 2, is located on the temple area, midway between the outside of the eyebrow and the orbit of the eye. The point is located in the depression just behind the orbit of the eye. Gentle circular rubbing motion with your thumb or first or second finger can be effective here.

*Taiyang*

- Gall Bladder 1 (GB 1) is accessed in the depression just outside of the orbit of the eye. As with the Extra Point 2 just above it, your thumb or first and second finger can be used here.

*Gall Bladder 1*

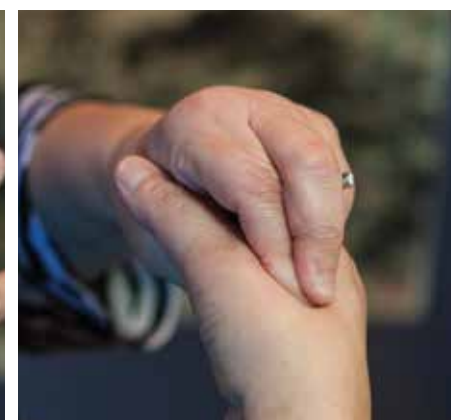
- Stomach 8 (St 8) is located at the corner of the forehead, in a line upwards from the outer orbit of the eye, slightly diagonal and backwards. It is on the temple, about halfway from the level of the eye orbit to the top of the head. Use your thumb, second or third finger, to apply circular pressure on this point. This point is also very useful for headache pain on the side of the head.

*Stomach 8*

MASTER HEADACHE RELIEF POINT IN THE HAND

A major headache relief point in the hand is used mainly for headache pain in the front and side portion of the head. An overlap of relief may occur in the back of the head.

- Large Intestine 4 (LI 4) is in the hand on the back side of the palm in the web space between the thumb and index finger. Pressure is applied with your thumb using your other fingers on the palm for a supportive counterforce. If a your thumb is too big to hit the point accurately, the second or third finger may be used with the thumb now supplying the counterforce on the palm. The finger overlay method with the middle finger on top of the second finger for extra pressure works very well for many people on this key point.

*Large Intestine 4*

NAUSEA RELIEF

This specific point has been studied perhaps more than any other acupuncture point. This point can be particularly helpful if you experience nausea with your headache. Also, if you have nausea that comes on before your migraine headache, stimulating this point can work to shut down the nausea, short-circuiting the headache before it ramps up.

- Pericardium 6 (P 6) is at the front side of the forearm two-and-one-half thumb widths from the crease of the bent wrist in between two middle forearm tendons. This point is more exquisitely tender than many of the other points, so proceed cautiously as a sharp pain may be expected. The flat side of the thumb is usually used to rub this point, with the fingers grabbing the back of the forearm for support.



Pericardium 6

NECK AND SHOULDER BLADE RELIEF POINTS

These points along the back part of the forearm can be used for relief of neck and shoulder blade pain, with the relief spreading into the back of the head. Use your thumb to locate these points. Your other fingers grasp the fleshy part of front of the forearm for support.

- Triple Heater 4 (TH 4) is on the backside of the wrist at the junction between the two forearm bones the radius and the ulna. This point is nestled in between these bones.



Triple Heater 4

- Triple Heater 5 (TH 5) is found along the back of the forearm, about one third of the way from the wrist to the elbow. Rub this point vigorously for relief in the shoulder blade. If it is difficult to find the exact point, rub the whole area along the back of the forearm vigorously to hit the point.



Triple Heater 5

- Triple Heater 9 (TH 9) is located in the back of the forearm, closer to the elbow, roughly one quarter of the way between the outer elbow bone and the back of the wrist.



Triple Heater 9

FOOT POINTS

For a headache in the back of the head, where the upper shoulder muscles attach to the base of the neck, foot points may work well. Liver 2 on the foot corresponds to the Large Intestine 4 point that is in the web space between the thumb and index finger. The hand point, in contrast, is used for frontal head pain versus the foot points used for the back of the head. The foot points tend to produce sharper and more piercing pain than most other acupressure points, so proceed slowly.

- Gall Bladder 41 (GB 41) is found just below the junction of the fourth and fifth toes on the top of the foot.



Gall Bladder 41

- Liver 2 (Liv 2) is found in between the web space of the first and second toes two thumb widths up from the edge of the web space. This point is a mirror image of the LI 4 point that is in the web space between the thumb and index finger. The foot point tends to be better for pain relief in the back of the head, compared to the frontal head relief found with the LI 4 point. When aiming for a point in the right foot, cross the right leg over the left knee for easier access to apply pressure with the thumb, second or third fingers. The fingers or thumb not being used to apply direct pressure can be placed on the opposite side of the foot for counter-pressure.



Liver 2

- Liver 3 (Liv 3) is found just a thumb width farther up the foot from Liver 2, in between the first and second toe bones.



Liver 3

MENSTRUAL CRAMP RELIEF

For a headache suspected to be caused by menstrual cramps, stimulating the two points below may help.

- Stomach 44 (St 44) is located similarly to Liver 2 in the web space between the second and third toes. Cross the target leg over the other knee and use the second or third fingers to apply pressure, with the thumb on the sole of the foot as a counter-pressure. If it is easier to use the thumb to apply pressure, wrap the other fingers around to the sole of the foot for counter-pressure.



Stomach 44

- Stomach 43 (St 43) is in the depression between the second and third toe bones, just below the junction of these two toes.



Stomach 43

CALF POINTS

For general head, neck, and upper shoulder pain, try Spleen 8. It is of particular use if your neck is stiff. Turning your neck may become easier immediately after pressing this point.

- Spleen 8 (Sp 8) is on the inner portion of the calf, about one quarter of the way down the calf bone. If the target is the point on your left calf, sit with your left leg crossed over your right with your left ankle resting on your right knee. Your fingers wrap around the front of your shin bone. Find the point in the fleshy part of your upper calf with your thumb. Your thumb makes a circular movement around that sharp

point. People are often amazed as to how the Spleen 8 point relieves not only neck pain but neck stiffness as well.



Spleen 8

- Seven Tigers 3 is found on the outside of the calf, a third of the way from the ankle bone to the small bone of the calf prominence. This point may also be useful for relieving general head pain on the opposite side of the point. A unique way to use this point is to cross your right leg and let your right calf point rest on your left knee bone .



Seven Tigers 3

ARM POINTS FOR BACK PAIN

As an extra bonus, a brief detour from the headache points may be useful because these easily accessible acupressure points can be helpful for people with back pain. If acupressure relieves your headache you will likely benefit with acupressure for other afflictions. Most back acupressure points are located in the back and leg. However, elbow points are easier to reach, and correspond to some of the points in the knee area that also relieve back pain. The points work best for muscle tension and mild nerve irritation. For people with bony deformities in the spine, the points tend not to work well. For back pain with radiating pain into one leg, but not both, try the following point. This point works best when the back and leg pain is not sharp and severe, but rather more of a dull soreness in the back and leg.

- Large Intestine 11 (LI 11) is located in the crease of the elbow joint on the outer part of the arm, about two thumb widths out from the center of the elbow joint. Rub in a circular pattern with the thumb, with the other fingers supporting the elbow.



Large Intestine 11

For general back pain, these points along the elbow joint line can be used.

- Lung 5 (LU 5) is found in the elbow crease, just to the outside of the center of the elbow, on the outside of the biceps tendon. Use thumb pressure.



Lung 5

- Heart 3 (H 3) is in the inner part of the elbow crease, just in front of the elbow bone. Use thumb pressure.



Heart 3

When back pain is accompanied with general hip pain, try this point.

- Heart 2 (H 2). Bend the elbow and locate the bone at the inner part of the elbow joint. Now move three thumb widths up the inner arm in the direction of the armpit. Use thumb pressure with the other fingers supporting by grasping the upper arm.



CONCLUSION

Acupressure is not magic, even though many of my clients tell me the immediate relief they feel from pressing a point feels like magic. People who respond the best have acupressure points that are tender to the touch.

One research study by Cady and Farmer concludes by observing that acupuncture provides headache relief without the risks from medication. They state that even after 4,000 years acupuncture stands up to modern scientific scrutiny, and they question whether modern headache medications currently in use will hold up as well 4,000 years from now.³³

In China, I saw pictures of hundreds of people waiting in line to have an acupuncture treatment from Dr. Zhang. His success was strictly a matter of technique and application. At one point during my tutelage in China, I asked Dr. Zhang his philosophy on why he thought acupuncture works. I had assumed he would give me an explanation based on lines of energy flows or an ancient metaphysical theory. However, Dr. Zhang's answer was, "I have no philosophy. It works. That's my philosophy."