

Personalized Management of Acne Using Acupuncture Combined with Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract:

Acne is a common chronic inflammatory skin disorder with a complex pathogenesis involving endocrine imbalance, genetic predisposition, immune-inflammatory responses, psychological factors, and lifestyle influences. With the accelerated pace of modern life and changes in dietary habits, the incidence of acne has been increasing steadily, significantly affecting patients' appearance, mental health, and quality of life. Guided by the principles of syndrome differentiation and holistic concepts in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), this study systematically explores the etiology and pathogenesis of acne from both TCM and Western medical perspectives, as well as syndrome differentiation and individualized treatment strategies combining acupuncture and herbal medicine. Through literature review, theoretical analysis, and the summarization of clinical experience, the study focuses on integrated acupuncture-herbal treatment protocols for common syndromes, including lung meridian wind-heat syndrome, spleen-stomach damp-heat syndrome, and disharmony of the Chong and Ren meridians. In addition, individualized treatment models are developed by considering factors such as constitution, gender, menstrual cycle, geographical environment, and lifestyle habits. The results indicate that acupuncture combined with herbal medicine can effectively alleviate clinical symptoms of acne, reduce recurrence rates, and improve patient satisfaction, demonstrating significant therapeutic efficacy, particularly in patients with lung wind-heat syndrome and damp-heat syndrome. It is concluded that an individualized treatment approach based on syndrome differentiation and the holistic concept can fully utilize the unique advantages of TCM and provide new perspectives and valuable references for the clinical management of acne.

Keywords:

Acupuncture, Acne, Personalized Treatment, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Syndrome Differentiation

1. Introduction

Acne vulgaris is a common chronic inflammatory disease of the pilosebaceous unit, which predominantly affects adolescents and young adults. Its clinical manifestations

mainly include comedones, papules, pustules, nodules, and cystic lesions. In severe cases, it may leave scars and post-inflammatory pigmentation. Acne not only affects patients' appearance but also has adverse impacts on their psychological well-being and quality of life. In recent years, with the accelerating pace of life, changes in dietary structure, and increasing psychological stress, the incidence of acne has shown a rising trend. Modern medicine considers that the development of acne is associated with factors such as androgen level imbalance, increased sebum secretion, abnormal follicular keratinization, microbial infection, and inflammatory responses. However, current treatment options still have limitations, including relatively high recurrence rates and potential adverse effects. In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), acne is classified under terms such as “feng acne,” “comedones,” and “wine acne.” It is believed that its occurrence is closely related to wind-heat in the lung meridian, damp-heat in the spleen and stomach, and disharmony of the Chong and Ren meridians. TCM emphasizes syndrome differentiation and holistic treatment principles in managing the disease. Acupuncture, as a characteristic therapy of TCM, has the advantages of regulating qi and blood, unblocking meridians, and balancing organ functions. When combined with herbal medicine, it can achieve both symptomatic and root-level treatment effects and improve clinical efficacy. Therefore, this paper systematically analyzes the etiology and pathogenesis of acne from both traditional Chinese and Western medical perspectives, as well as syndrome differentiation patterns and individualized treatment strategies, based on a review of relevant literature and clinical research findings. It particularly focuses on the clinical application characteristics and therapeutic advantages of acupuncture combined with herbal medicine for different TCM syndrome types of acne. This study suggests that acne patients with different syndrome types, constitutions, and individual factors should adopt differentiated treatment strategies. An individualized treatment model combining acupuncture and herbal medicine demonstrates better overall regulatory effects and long-term efficacy than single-modality treatments. Integrating syndrome differentiation with factors such as constitution, region, season, and lifestyle may further improve clinical outcomes and reduce recurrence rates, thereby providing theoretical support and clinical reference for individualized TCM treatment of acne.

2. Etiology and Pathogenesis of Acne

2.1. Etiology and Pathogenesis of Acne in Traditional Chinese Medicine

According to Shuowen Jiezi, “Cuo refers to a small swelling.” In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), acne is also known as “lung wind” (Fei Feng) or “facial papules” (Fen Ci). It most commonly occurs during adolescence and is characterized by comedones from which white, powdery material can be expressed. In severe cases, pustules, nodules, and post-inflammatory pigmentation may develop, causing both physical and psychological distress to patients. Therefore, understanding the etiology and pathogenesis of acne is essential for establishing an effective treatment strategy.

The Huangdi Neijing states, “When sweating occurs and the body is exposed to dampness, disease may arise.” This concept provides an explanation for the etiology of acne, suggesting that external pathogenic factors invade the body during perspiration, become retained in the skin, and subsequently lead to the development of acne. Regarding its pathogenesis, Waike Qixuan records that “acne develops when the lung qi fails to disperse and is attacked by wind.” In TCM theory, the lungs govern the skin and body hair. When the skin is invaded by external pathogens, the dispersing

and descending functions of the lungs become impaired. As a result, the circulation of qi throughout the body is disrupted, the body's vital qi is weakened, resistance to pathogenic factors declines, and the retained pathogens gradually transform into heat, which contributes to the formation of acne. Furthermore, Waiké Zhengzong states that “lung wind is associated with lung heat, while acne, rosacea, and related skin conditions are associated with the spleen meridian.” This theory highlights the relationship between acne and dysfunction of the spleen and stomach. In modern society, excessive consumption of greasy, sweet, and rich foods may impair spleen function, leading to the accumulation of dampness and phlegm. Over time, dampness stagnates and transforms into heat, resulting in damp-heat of the spleen and stomach, which is considered an important pathogenic factor in acne. In addition, disharmony of the Chong and Ren meridians, particularly in women, may also contribute to the development of acne.

2.2. Etiology and Pathogenesis in Western Medicine

Hormone levels influence the development of acne. Studies suggest that the mechanism of acne may be related to androgen-induced inflammatory responses in the sebaceous glands and increased sebum production[1] Yang Jiankang [2] and colleagues conducted experiments related to gene pathways and identified twelve acne-associated gene pathways. These pathways are generally related to endocrine function, immune regulation, and metabolic processes. This aligns with the characteristics of polygenic inheritance [3], suggesting that acne can be passed on to the next generation, with a higher incidence particularly among first- and second-degree relatives. Psychological factors also play a role. Chen Xiangqi [4] selected relevant cases from the military population and conducted statistical analysis. The results showed that paranoia and obsessive-compulsive traits are associated with the onset of acne, indicating that psychological factors are an important contributor to its development. In addition, some researchers believe that diet is also related to acne. The pathogenesis in Traditional Chinese Medicine is associated with the spleen and stomach, which is consistent with TCM theory.

3. Syndrome Differentiation and Classification

3.1. Treatment of Wind-Heat in the Lung Channel Syndrome

According to the Standards for Diagnosis and Therapeutic Effect of TCM Syndromes [5], the main clinical manifestations of acne with wind-heat in the lung channel include blackheads or whiteheads as the primary lesions, often accompanied by erythematous papules with mild itching and pain. The tongue is typically red with a thin yellow coating, and the pulse is superficial and rapid. For this pattern, external treatment commonly involves acupuncture at the Foot Sima point [6] and related sensitized points, combined with a reducing (xie) technique using filiform needles. On this basis, internal administration of Pipa Qingfei Decoction is used. The reported outcomes show a high cure rate and good therapeutic effect. The Foot Sima point is located near the Fengshi region and is believed to have the function of dispersing both external and internal wind. It is considered a primary point for treating wind-heat affecting the Lung channel and is one of the special empirical points of the Tung acupuncture system (Dong's extraordinary points), which are derived from clinical experience. Clinical practice suggests that Foot Sima is an important point for treating pulmonary-related disorders. Modern studies indicate that massage therapy can

relieve muscle tension, improve blood circulation, regulate the nervous system, and reduce psychological stress. Integrated internal and external treatment is a major approach in contemporary acne management. Zhou Zhijie [7] collected 288 cases of acne, most of which were classified as wind-heat in the Lung channel pattern. Acupuncture was applied to points such as Quchi, Hegu, Dazhui, Feishu, and Fengchi. Among patterns including spleen-stomach damp-heat and disharmony of the Chong and Ren channels, treatment targeting the wind-heat in the Lung channel showed the best efficacy. Cure was defined as the complete absence of papules and comedones without recurrence. The total effective rate reached 93.5%. Quchi and Hegu are points of the Yangming channel, which is abundant in qi and blood; stimulation of these points promotes smooth circulation of qi and blood. The Large Intestine channel is frequently used in treating skin diseases and is considered a primary channel for dermatological conditions. Fengchi belongs to the Gallbladder channel and is effective in dispelling both internal and external wind. Dazhui clears heat, while Feishu treats Lung-related disorders.

3.2. Treatment of Damp-Heat in the Spleen and Stomach Syndrome

According to the 13th Five-Year Plan TCM textbook, the clinical manifestations of damp-heat in the spleen and stomach syndrome mainly include facial papules, or the presence of pustules, nodules, and cysts. The face appears oily, accompanied by constipation. The tongue is red with a yellow, greasy coating, and the pulse is slippery and rapid. Research has shown [7] that acupuncture combined with the Linggui Bafa (Eight-Method Turtle Technique) is more effective in treating acne than acupuncture alone. The commonly selected acupoints include Hegu, Quchi, Neiting, Yinlingquan, Xuehai, Baiyang, Sanyinjiao, Fenglong, Dicang, Jiache, Sibai, and Taiyang, all of which are manipulated using a reducing (xie) technique. According to the Linggui Bafa acupoint selection system, the required paired points include Waiguan–Zulinqi, Gongsun–Neiguan, Lieque–Zhaozhai, and Houxi–Shenmai, with bilateral needling. Clinical observations indicate a significant therapeutic effect in the treatment group. The Linggui Bafa is based on ancient philosophical principles combined with the theory of the Eight Extraordinary Meridians. It determines specific acupoints according to temporal factors, integrating both spatial meridian selection and time-based acupuncture regulation. This approach reflects both the holistic concept and the principle of treatment based on individual and temporal conditions. This is consistent with the core concepts of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which emphasizes perceiving subtle external manifestations to infer internal pathological changes. Although acne appears superficially on the skin, tongue and pulse diagnosis can reveal underlying disorders of the spleen and stomach, guiding targeted treatment. This reflects the TCM principle of holistic thinking. According to the “three-factor” treatment principle (individual, geographical, and seasonal factors), it is necessary to consider the human body, regional differences, and seasonal timing during acupuncture practice. The holistic concept regards the human body as an integrated whole, influenced by both natural and social environments. Therefore, these factors should be taken into account during treatment to achieve better therapeutic outcomes.

3.3. Disharmony of the Chong and Ren Channels

According to the 13th Five-Year Plan TCM textbook, the clinical manifestations of disharmony of the Chong and Ren channels are characterized by fluctuations in skin eruptions in relation to the menstrual cycle, often accompanied by irregular

menstruation or dysmenorrhea. The tongue is red with a greasy coating, and the pulse is wiry, thin, and rapid. In females, the liver is considered the congenital foundation. Menstruation and childbirth [8] consume essence and blood, and over time this may lead to yin deficiency. In addition, modern women often experience high levels of stress and emotional instability, which can result in liver qi stagnation that transforms into heat. On the skin, this pathological process manifests as acne. The dynamic balance of yin and yang is the physiological basis for the normal menstrual cycle. During the premenstrual phase, yang qi becomes relatively strong, and liver yang may become disturbed, leading to disharmony of the Chong and Ren channels and aggravation of acne. After menstruation, heat is expelled through menstrual blood, liver qi becomes smooth, and the Chong and Ren channels become harmonized, resulting in alleviation of acne symptoms. Therefore, acne severity varies across different phases of the menstrual cycle, and treatment strategies should also be adjusted accordingly. During the premenstrual phase, the main pattern is qi stagnation with blood stasis. Acupuncture points such as Ganshu (BL18), Quchi (LI11), Neiting (ST44), and Taichong (LR3) are selected. Ganshu treats liver disorders; Quchi and Neiting clear heat; Taichong regulates liver qi, as smooth qi movement promotes blood circulation. During menstruation, acupuncture is applied to Taichong (LR3), Gesu (BL17), Xuehai (SP10), and Hegu (LI4). Acne associated with menstruation is mainly related to the liver. Taichong can both purge liver heat and relieve qi stagnation, making it a primary point in treatment. Xuehai and Gesu treat blood stasis, and Xuehai is also effective for skin diseases. Located on the Spleen channel, Xuehai reflects the principle that in treating liver-related disorders, one should first strengthen the spleen. Hegu, a point of the Large Intestine channel, is closely associated with skin conditions, as the Large Intestine channel is frequently used in dermatological treatment. In the postmenstrual phase, points such as Shenshu (BL23), Qihai (CV6), and Taixi (KI3) are selected. This stage is characterized mainly by yin deficiency with fire rising. These points nourish the liver and kidneys, replenish yin, and clear deficient heat. The differentiation of three stages with corresponding acupuncture prescriptions reflects a distinctive feature of Traditional Chinese Medicine and is one of the reasons for its good clinical efficacy.

4. Holistic Concept

4.1. Zang-Fu (Organ) Aspect

The holistic concept is one of the fundamental principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and plays a major role in modern clinical practice. It is stated that “all pain, itching, and sores belong to the Heart.” A clinical case [9] reported a patient with a large number of facial comedones, some of which were pustular lesions. The symptoms worsened with heat, and were accompanied by constipation and dark yellow urine. The syndrome differentiation was identified as upward flaring of Heart fire combined with accumulation of heat in the Lung. The patient was treated with Xiexin Decoction combined with heat-clearing and detoxifying herbs, achieving significant therapeutic effect. Acne is also known in TCM as “Lung Wind acne,” clearly indicating its association with the Lung channel. In one case, a student presented with papules and comedones from which white, powder-like material could be expressed. The lesions occurred on the face, with continuous formation of new acne lesions, also extending to the back. This was diagnosed as wind-heat in the Lung channel syndrome. Treatment with Pipa Qingfei Decoction produced good clinical results. In cases related to the Liver, a male patient presented with facial flushing, oily

skin, numerous papules and pustules, dry and hard stools, a yellow greasy tongue coating, and a slippery rapid pulse. The syndrome was diagnosed as damp-heat in the Liver and Gallbladder. Treatment was based on modified Longdan Xiegan Decoction. In cases related to the Spleen, in addition to facial acne, symptoms such as abdominal distension, poor appetite, greasy tongue coating, and a slippery pulse were observed. Treatment was given with a modified Wuwei Xiaodu Yin, with favorable outcomes. In cases related to the Kidney, a male patient presented with granular facial lesions, irritability and facial flushing, soreness and weakness of the lower back and knees, dark yellow urine, and constipation. The syndrome was identified as hyperactivity of ministerial fire with liver and kidney yin deficiency. Treatment was based on a modified Zhibai Dihuang Pill, with good therapeutic results.

4.2. Natural Environment Aspect

Human beings and nature form an integrated whole. Research shows that the onset of acne most commonly occurs in summer. Summer-heat is often combined with dampness, and the nature of summer-heat is characterized by intense heat, which corresponds to the pathological features of acne[10]. The interaction of these two pathogenic factors may trigger or aggravate the disease. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, summer corresponds to the Heart and Spleen organs, which is consistent with the previously discussed organ-based pathogenesis, indirectly supporting the validity of the holistic concept, which has been verified through clinical practice. During summer treatment, medications that clear Heart fire are often combined, while in late summer (the “long summer”), Spleen-strengthening and dampness-resolving herbs are commonly used. Geographical factors also play an important role. According to Su Wen: Yi Fa Fang Yi Lun (“On the Different Methods Appropriate to Different Regions”): “In the north... the land is high and cold, with strong winds and freezing conditions. People live in open environments and consume milk and meat; cold accumulation leads to fullness disorders, and treatment is suitable with moxibustion.” “In the south... the land is low and humid, with frequent mist and dew. People prefer sour and fermented foods; thus, they tend to develop contracture and bi-syndromes, and treatment is suitable with gentle needling.” This demonstrates that different regions require different therapeutic approaches. Southern regions are characterized by a warm and humid climate, which is a major contributing factor to acne development. The climatic conditions in these areas tend to predispose individuals to damp-heat constitutions, and damp-heat is one of the main pathogenic patterns of acne, making these populations more susceptible to the disease. Therefore, treatment in such regions should emphasize clearing heat and eliminating dampness, often requiring relatively stronger dosages of herbs, while also paying attention to nourishing yin. In routine clinical practice, dampness- and heat-clearing herbs should be appropriately incorporated. In contrast, northwestern regions are characterized by dry and cold climates, where the incidence of acne is relatively lower. However, treatment in these regions should avoid excessive use of drying or dampness-draining herbs and instead appropriately include warming and tonifying medicines to harmonize with environmental conditions. These principles also provide guidance for health preservation. Harmonizing with nature helps maintain physical health and prolong life expectancy, which is consistent with the holistic principle in both disease treatment and preventive care.

4.3. Aspect Lifestyle Factors

Modern research shows that the onset of acne is closely associated with irregular daily routines, prolonged sitting, and excessive use of computers and mobile phones. From a Western medical perspective, staying up late is related to endocrine disorders, particularly increased androgen levels. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, irregular sleep affects the liver and gallbladder's function of regulating and dispersing qi, thereby contributing to the development of acne. Prolonged sitting impairs the flesh, which corresponds to the Spleen in TCM theory. When the Spleen and Stomach are weakened, the body's vital qi becomes deficient, making it easier for pathogenic factors to invade and thus leading to acne. Diet is also closely related to acne. With the continuous improvement of modern living standards, food variety has increased, and unbalanced dietary preferences are common. Lack of attention to healthy eating habits and excessive consumption of rich, fatty, and greasy foods can lead to damp-heat accumulation in the Spleen and Stomach, which is another major cause of acne. During treatment, a light and balanced diet should be recommended, avoiding overly indulgent eating habits. It is necessary to regulate and harmonize the five Zang organs while also taking into account the patient's dietary habits and regional differences. Patients should be advised to adjust their lifestyle and follow dietary recommendations while taking medication. Applying the holistic concept to guide treatment is consistent with classical medical experience and is expected to significantly improve therapeutic outcomes. In acupuncture therapy, the Ziwu Liuzhu (midnight-noon ebb-flow) method can also be used as an adjunct to enhance clinical efficacy.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the development of acne vulgaris is closely associated with traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) pathogenesis such as wind-heat in the Lung meridian, damp-heat in the Spleen and Stomach, and disharmony of the Chong and Ren meridians, as well as modern medical factors including genetics, endocrine disorders, psychological stress, and lifestyle habits. Acupuncture combined with herbal medicine can fully reflect the characteristics of syndrome differentiation and holistic concepts in TCM. Based on patients' syndrome types, constitution, gender, physiological cycles, regional environment, and lifestyle factors, individualized interventions can be implemented to regulate visceral function, balance yin-yang and qi-blood, improve clinical symptoms, and reduce recurrence rates.

Compared with conventional Western medical treatments, the combination of acupuncture and herbal medicine not only focuses on the improvement of local skin lesions but also emphasizes the regulation of the overall bodily state, demonstrating certain advantages in long-term efficacy and recurrence control. In contrast, Western medicine has stronger advantages in rapidly controlling inflammation and shortening the disease course, and the two approaches are therefore complementary.

Building upon traditional syndrome differentiation, this study further integrates concepts such as constitutional identification, chronomedicine, regional differences, and lifestyle management, thereby enriching the theoretical and practical framework of individualized acne treatment and providing both theoretical value and clinical guidance. However, current research still has limitations, including insufficient large-sample randomized controlled trials, lack of standardized efficacy evaluation criteria, and incomplete understanding of underlying mechanisms.

Future studies should strengthen evidence-based medical research, improve standardized individualized diagnostic and treatment protocols, further investigate the mechanisms of acupuncture combined with herbal medicine in acne treatment, and integrate modern information technologies to promote precision medicine. These efforts may provide more scientific and effective evidence for improving acne treatment outcomes and enhancing patients' quality of life.

6. Discussion

The incidence of acne has been increasing year by year. The main reasons for this trend are unhealthy lifestyles, including staying up late, which leads to endocrine disorders and increased androgen levels. Irregular eating habits, poor dietary hygiene, and selective eating can cause gastrointestinal dysfunction. Emotional distress and high psychological stress may also lead to liver metabolic disorders. In addition, genetic factors play a role, reflecting the characteristics of polygenic inheritance. The pathogenesis of acne in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is generally consistent with these modern understandings. In addition, TCM identifies specific syndrome types related to menstrual cycles, such as disharmony of the Chong and Ren channels, as well as wind-heat in the Lung channel. Clarifying the underlying mechanisms of disease provides a basis for treatment and allows for the summarization of therapeutic principles and standardized treatment strategies, which is of great clinical significance. In TCM, acne is mainly classified and treated through syndrome differentiation, including wind-heat in the Lung channel, damp-heat in the Spleen and Stomach, and disharmony of the Chong and Ren channels. Some practitioners, based on clinical experience, have also identified an additional pattern of phlegm-damp stagnation with heat. Treatment is determined according to the patient's symptoms, signs, constitution, and regional factors, with appropriate use of heat-clearing, yin-nourishing, and yang-tonifying herbs, or corresponding acupuncture points as needed. In Western medicine, acne is classified according to lesion severity into [11] mild (Grade I), moderate (Grade II), moderately severe (Grade III), and severe (Grade IV), with different treatment approaches applied for each stage. This also represents a form of individualized therapy based on disease severity. Individualized treatment based on the holistic concept is mainly reflected in the principle of "observing external manifestations to infer internal conditions." Although the disease presents as acne, its clinical manifestations vary, corresponding to different internal organs, with a particularly close relationship to the five Zang organs. In treatment, greater emphasis is placed on the organ most closely associated with the condition, thereby achieving organ-specific individualized therapy. Regarding the natural environment, since humans must adapt to nature, environmental conditions significantly influence constitutional tendencies. In cold regions, warming and tonifying herbs are added in treatment, while in humid and hot regions, heat-clearing and dampness-drying herbs are emphasized, reflecting constitution-based adjustments. Acne onset is also associated with seasonal factors, particularly summer, which is characterized by damp-heat. As "similar qi leads to similar diseases," treatment in this context focuses on eliminating dampness and heat using corresponding herbs and acupuncture points. This represents season-based individualized therapy. In addition, constitutional factors are also important, including damp-heat constitution, yin deficiency constitution, yang deficiency constitution, qi stagnation constitution, and phlegm-damp constitution [12]. Different constitutions require different therapeutic emphases, which constitutes constitution-based individualized treatment.

Individuals are independent entities, and clinical manifestations vary significantly among patients; therefore, treatment must also differ accordingly. Management should be tailored to specific conditions, rather than adopting a uniform approach. Integrating the holistic concept into treatment can significantly improve therapeutic outcomes and enhance patient satisfaction. Western medical treatment of acne is often fast-acting but associated with more side effects and a higher risk of recurrence. In addition, it places less emphasis on patient constitution and generally follows standardized treatment protocols with limited flexibility for modification. Moreover, Western medicine tends to focus on heat-clearing approaches, which may not be suitable for patients with yang deficiency patterns. In contrast, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a slower onset of action but allows more controllable dosage and incorporates considerations of patient constitution, regional factors, and environmental influences. Although TCM treatment is relatively more complex, its clinical efficacy is more stable, with a lower recurrence rate. According to studies, acupuncture combined with herbal medicine demonstrates better efficacy and lower recurrence rates compared with Western pharmaceutical treatments. TCM also emphasizes dietary habits and regular lifestyle routines. Proper regulation of daily activities and balanced diet contribute to maintaining health and longevity. By following natural rhythms and harmonizing with environmental conditions, the likelihood of disease occurrence is reduced. Even when illness does occur, symptoms are generally milder, treatment is simpler, and recovery rates are higher. Current research suggests that TCM has become an indispensable approach in the treatment of acne, particularly acupuncture-based heat-purging techniques, which show excellent clinical outcomes. Individualized therapy is expected to become the mainstream direction of future medical treatment.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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