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Model Janice
Dickinson, pictured
here, is a fan of the
acupuncture facelift



Acupuncture: Can It Make You Look Younger?

Why are so many people turning to this ancient treatment for nonsurgical facelifts, fertility boosts, backache cures and more? By Dana Wood

Photograph by Matthew Rolston

On a scale of 1 to 10 of the things women will do to get pregnant, I'm at about level 2: concerned, but not quite ready to dive into the nearest vat of fertility hormones. Whether I'm in denial or just a massive wimp, I'm all about baby steps. Lucky for me, the retro-chic wellness treatment du jour—acupuncture—is winning raves for its alleged ability to help in the little-bundle-of-joy department. But what isn't acupuncture being touted for these days? Literally thousands of years old, this ancient secret is suddenly having a major moment.

Acupuncture's rising star is due in part to a wave of serious reviews by entities like the World Health Organization and the National Institutes of Health, which have recognized the procedure's success in treating numerous conditions. And then there's the celeb factor. A slew of stars is reportedly keen on acupuncture, from Madonna to Gwyneth Paltrow. The latter has credited her acupuncturist with helping resolve her love life.

To learn more, I head to Madison Avenue's Exhale Spa to chat with acupuncturist Robert MacDonald, owner of the Midtown-based Intentional Health and Wellness (917-915-6481) and director of healing at Exhale's two Manhattan outposts (212-249-3000). Needling away such ailments as migraines, anxiety and perimenopause, MacDonald and his team spend their days tending to stressed-out superachievers. Before we tackle my case, however, MacDonald gives me an overview of this millennia-old modality. For starters, acupuncture is part of a larger system of traditional Chinese, or Oriental, medicine (TCM or TOM)—alongside lots of

hard-to-pronounce treatments like Tui Na and Qi Gong. (The now-trendy cupping also falls under the TCM/TOM umbrella.)

Via the insertion of very thin needles along invisible pathways called meridians, acupuncture aims to improve the flow of Qi (a.k.a. chi), which is said to regulate the body's spiritual, mental and physical balance. "The ancient Chinese had an amazing understanding of systems and functions of the body," says MacDonald. "It's a holistic, wellness-based preventative medicine that is meant to address literally everything." Though there's no definitive Western explanation for how and why acupuncture works, mainstream scientists are learning more about it all the time. Essentially, the insertion of the acupuncture needles is thought to stimulate positive physiological responses in the body. From the release of endorphins and serotonin (a key reason acupuncture is so successful in treating pain), to the stimulation of the hypothalamus and pituitary gland and an increase in immune function, the systemic effects of acupuncture are thought to be considerable.

I'm relieved to learn that hyperqualified acupuncturists like MacDonald often undergo four to six years of training, although in some states, it's possible for practitioners such as chiropractors and physical therapists (or even dentists) to obtain a certificate to perform acupuncture after just 100 to 300 hours of training. In the right hands, safety is all but a given, but as with any procedure involving needles, proper hygiene is critical. The majority of acupuncturists today use presterilized single-use disposable needles made from high-quality surgical stainless steel.

At Exhale, it's time for my "intake," the debriefing session that ➤

precedes every acupuncture treatment. “Stick out your tongue,” says MacDonald, simultaneously grabbing my wrists so he can check my pulse at various points. He scrutinizes some pesky dark circles under my eyes, then starts in with a host of embarrassing personal questions. In his defense, I have already tipped him off that I’ve been trying to get pregnant for well over a year. My diagnosis: Qi and blood-flow stagnation, with an underlying kidney deficiency. “It doesn’t mean you have some kind of Western disease pathology,” he says. “You don’t need to go get your kidneys X-rayed. We just need to determine what your pattern of ‘disharmony’ is, with the goal of regulating your menstrual cycle.”

And with that, MacDonald is off and needling, sticking me in a total of nine spots—dead center in the middle of my forehead, near my thumbs and around my knees and ankles. The needles hurt just a little, right at the point of insertion (it feels like a rubber band being snapped at your skin), and they don’t leave a trace of bruising. Hopping off the table about 20 minutes later and zipping back into an appointment-packed day, I am calm and stress-free for hours. But later that evening, I feel a little woozy, almost as if I have the flu. By morning, I’m back to my hard-charging self.

An ultracustomized course of treatment, acupuncture is definitely not one size fits all. Depending on your condition, you may require multiple visits or further “maintenance” follow-ups in the future.

The number of needles inserted at a given appointment will also vary according to the info gleaned from that day’s intake. On the time front, budget at least an hour for your first visit, as you’ll be giving your acupuncturist a full rundown of your health history. Subsequent visits typically run 30 to 45 minutes. Even crazy-busy types find the time to squeeze in appointments. West Coast beauty guru Robin Coe-Hutshing, for one, has been a fan of acupuncture for years. Before she discovered her true calling (she’s the owner of Studio at Fred Segal, the überpotion emporium in Santa Monica), Coe-Hutshing toiled in visual merchandising at a department store, “lugging around heavy mannequins and props.” One day, she somehow found the strength to carry a king-size mattress up three flights of stairs—all by herself.

“I lost feeling in my right leg,” she recalls. Within days, that numbness gave way to excruciating back pain. Thus began “a long saga of traction, physical therapy, chiropractic adjustment and denial,” she says. “I was told that I wouldn’t be able to walk without pain unless I had surgery, which I wanted to avoid at all costs. In desperation, I tried acupuncture. The relief was almost immediate.”

Actress and writer Padma Lakshmi also credits acupuncture with alleviating her back pain. After her last movie (a Bollywood film called *Boom*), she suffered chronic discomfort from the artillery she was required to carry during filming. So she headed to her acupuncturist, Noah Rubinstein, who had treated her for insomnia and severe menstrual pain. “My back was so out of whack,” she says, “that it took even Noah a while to get the kinks out of me.”

Rubinstein, co-owner of New York’s Longevity Health Wellness

Center (212-675-9355), is clearly developing a devoted following among chiefters like Lakshmi and publicist Alison Brod, whose clients include Godiva, Clarins and hairdresser Oscar Blandi. Although Brod started treatments only recently (for a level of insomnia that leads to her e-mailing European colleagues in the middle of the night), she has been able to rest more easily on Rubinstein’s watch. “The times I’ve done it, I’ve had the most incredible sleep that night,” says Brod. “But the effects are gone the next day. So I try to picture myself back in that room, with the needles in and the Qi flowing and all those earthy, crunchy things.”

Of course, one of the hottest applications of acupuncture—“acufacelifts”—is all about finding your bliss in a decidedly superficial way. At New York’s Eva Scrivo Salon (212-677-7315), two types of acupuncture-based face tighteners are available. The Olive Leaf Wholeness Center and Spa in New York (212-477-0405) has also been doing brisk business with its Acupuncture Facial Lift. According to spa director Rachel Lang, the procedure starts with an intake with the acupuncturist and a thorough cleansing of the skin. “Acupuncture is tricky with the face, because there isn’t a lot of what we call adipose, or fat, tissue,” she says. “The preparation is key. It softens the skin so the needles can go right in and be more effective.”

Janice Dickinson, the ’70s supermodel and a star of *America’s Next Top Model*, swears by the acupuncture facelift, even though she has already had a traditional lift. “You can have a dozen antiaging procedures, but unless your insides are stress-free, you’ll look terrible on the outside,” says Dickinson, who recently underwent a series of treatments at Santa Monica’s Willow Spa (310-453-9004). “Maybe a fancy cream will do this for you, or sex, or a good night’s sleep, but everyone and her mother have remarked on how fresh I look.”

Allison Levinson King, an acupuncturist in the hipster Silver Lake section of Los Angeles (323-662-3907), counts Rene Russo, as well as other film types and several rockers, among her clients. Yet she rarely gets requests for acupuncture facial rejuvenation. “I treat women for endometriosis and menstrual irregularities as well as infertility,” she says. “Acupuncture can be really effective for infertility.” Though she modestly demurs regarding most of her success stories, she’ll own up to one that sounds like an episode of *The L Word*. It seems a lesbian couple itching to get pregnant had a sperm-donor pal fly in from across the country. Alas, the prospective mom just couldn’t ovulate. With time running out—and the donor packing his bags to head back east—the would-be mother landed in Levinson King’s office. “She came in and I treated her,” says the acupuncturist. “She said she literally ovulated on the way home, got pregnant and now has a beautiful little boy.”

Emboldened by this happy tale, I grab my agenda to map out my next round of acupuncture appointments. With the clock ticking—*clanging*, actually—on the baby-making front, it’s high time I get straight to the point. ■

To check an acupuncturist’s credentials, visit nccaom.org, the official website of the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.

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