

How Do You Treat *Menstrual Cramps* in Your Practice?

A PATIENT PRESENTS with severe menstrual cramps, and all I have is three needles. How am I going to treat her? What is my acupuncture diagnosis? Using the strategy of The Four Magic Meridians as taught by Richard Te-Fu Tan, OMD, LAc, where am I going to place these three needles?

Unlike Zang-Fu diagnosis, acupuncture diagnosis asks: (1) “What meridian(s) is/are unbalanced?”; (2) “What healthy meridian(s) balance(s) the ‘sick’ meridian(s)?”; and (3) “What strategy can solve the problem?”¹

In the present case, the woman’s symptoms present in the lower midline abdomen. The involved organ is the Uterus. The meridians that cross the lower abdomen in this area are Ren (Conception), KI (KID or Kidney), and ST (Stomach). The balancing meridians according to the seven systems of meridians balance are Sharing, Branching Channels (Bie-Jing), Internal/External (Biao Li), Chinese Clock Opposites, Chinese Clock Neighbors, and the Sick Meridian itself, according to the Ba Gua (Table 1).

In Table 1, note that the “sick” meridians, KID and ST are balanced by the common meridians, PC and LI. Recalling that these meridians cross the length of the torso from groin–perineum to sternal notch–shoulders, these four meridians can be used to treat *any* problems in the midline–paramedical line from the neck to the genitals. Thus Dr. Tan

has designated this four-meridian combination, The Four Magic Meridians.

Using Dr. Tan’s Acupuncture 1,2,3 approach,¹ once having identified the meridian(s) that need(s) balancing and the meridian(s), treating it is necessary to decide if the strategy will be focal or global. In the present case of the patient with menstrual cramps, even if she has some systemic symptoms, such as sweating, pallor, or headache, the problem is focal—in the Uterus. Dr. Tan’s philosophy is “if the problem is local, keep it focal.”¹ If we were to do a global balance treatment, the power of the treatment might be defused. Thus, we must design or “image” the treatment in such a way as to treat the Uterus. An added advantage is that the patient does not need to undress. How does one do that?

Auricular acupuncture is based on the theory that the body can be imaged on the ear. The same theory holds for such treatments as Korean Hand Acupuncture. One can use direct mirror imaging, limb on limb, or shoulder–hand to shoulder–hand, or reverse the mirror, imaging foot to hip. Other ways to image include torso to limb, head to limb, or shrinking the image such as head to hand.

In the present case, if I use the image of the torso to the upper limb with the shoulder representing the neck and the tips of the fingers representing the genitals, the umbilicus

TABLE 1. BALANCING MERIDIANS ACCORDING TO THE SEVEN SYSTEMS OF MERIDIANS BALANCE

Meridian name	Number	Foot Yang Ming ST	Foot Shao Yin KID	Ren	Side to needle
Sharing	1	LI	HT	Du	Contralateral
Bie-Jing Branching Channels	2	PC	SJ		Ipsilateral Contralateral
Biao Li Internal/External	3	SP	UB		Contralateral
Chinese Clock Opposites	4	PC	LI		Ipsilateral Contralateral
Chinese Clock Neighbors	5	LI	PC		Contralateral
Sick Meridian	6	ST	KID	Ren	Ipsilateral
Ba Gua	7	LU	SJ, SI		Ipsilateral Contralateral

Adapted from ref. 1.

KID is an alternate way to designate KI.

Medical Acupuncture is pleased to continue this regular feature, *Clinical Pearls*, which we have found to be very useful for, and practical to, the readership, and very popular. All of us are confronted with clinical challenges, especially when dealing with therapeutic strategies. We hope this ongoing collection of *Clinical Pearls* will be easily accessible and ready to put into action for the benefit of our patients, and even ourselves. How often do we ask our colleagues: “How do you treat...?” This time, we posed the question: “**How do you treat menstrual cramps in your practice?**” Herein lie your contributions. We trust that our readership will continue to participate in this section by either asking the questions or supplying the Pearls. If you have a “question” you would like to see answered please send it to our managing editor, Barbara Perrin, at: acu.editorial@gmail.com We encourage and welcome your input and participation. Please address your answers to “Pearls” to our managing editor at: acu.editorial@gmail.com

would be at the elbow crease and the uterus would be imaged in the palm just about 1 cun distal to PC 7 in an area the size of a quarter. Let’s call the center of the Uterus point PC 7.5. Palpating for Ashi points in this area, I would place my three needles in PC 7.5 Ashi and to the ulnar side and radial side in the points Mu Guan and Gu Guan Ashi.² Using strong stimulation if the cramps are severe should relieve this patient’s pain in a matter of minutes. This is the power of Balance Method Acupuncture and Dr. Tan’s Four Magic Points. “Li Gan Jian Ying” or “stand a pole under the sun and you should immediately see its shadow.”¹

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MENSTRUAL CRAMPING (dysmenorrhea), or Tong Jing as it is known in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), refers to lower abdominal pain that occurs before, during, or after menstruation. This condition can be primary or secondary. The primary type generally occurs in young women and is without any associated pathology, while the secondary type reflects pathology such as fibroid growths, pelvic inflammatory disease, or endometriosis.

Dysmenorrhea is a condition for which acupuncture has been shown to be effective in randomized trials.¹ TCM describes a number of patterns, including Liver Qi and Blood Stagnation, Cold in the Uterus, Blood Deficiency, and

Liver and Kidney deficiency—an extensive list that can be daunting to unravel. However, if the discussion is limited to primary dysmenorrhea, for which acupuncture is best utilized, then the differential becomes more manageable. Here, the most common syndrome is Qi Stagnation, standing alone or in association with Heat or Cold. Cold is suggested if the abdomen is cool to palpation, the pulse is taut and slow, and the cramping starts to subside after the application of a hot water bottle to the area; while Heat is suggested if the pulse is rapid, tense or slippery, and/or there is a history of recurrent urinary tract infections or herpes.

One simple approach to acupuncture is to regulate the Chong and Ren Mai, which tend to be out of harmony.² The territories of these two curious meridians intermingle, as they run from the perineum to the head, traversing the pelvis along the way. These meridians have opening, coupled, and other key points along their trajectories. The Chong Mai can be addressed with SP 4 (Gongsun), MH 6 (Neiguan), and ST 30 (Qichong); the Ren Mai can be addressed LU 7 (Lieque) and KI 6 (Zhaohai); while nonspecific Qi Stagnation can be addressed with LV 3 (Taichong), LI 4 (Hegu), and SP 6 (Sanyinjiao). Key leg points for Damp Heat include LV 2 (Xingjian), LV 8 (Ququan) KI 10 (Yingu), and SP 8 (Diji). Some useful local points in the lower abdomen include CV 4 (Guanyuan), CV 6 (Qihai), ST 28 (Shuidao), ST 29 (Guilai), KI 13 (Qixue), M-CA 18 (Zigong: Uterus point, located 3 cun lateral to CV 3 [Zhongji]) and N-CA 4 (Tituo, located 4 cun lateral to CV 4). Useful points in the low back include GV 4 (Mingmen), BL 23 (Shenshu), BL 52(47) (Zhishi), and BL 32 (Ciliao). Table 1 summarizes this list and provides additional information.

A series of twelve acupuncture treatments at weekly intervals, with increased frequency during times of discomfort, would seem reasonable. At each session, picture one of the three peripheral point groups to move Stagnant Qi and/or harmonize the Chong and Ren, and combine them with a couple of local points chosen from the Table, such as ST 29, CV 4, or Zigong, adding moxa and/or a TDP lamp (TDP is Teding Diancibo Pu, which loosely translates to special electromagnetic spectrum), if the lower Jiao is palpably cold. Do the same during the painful days, but add more local points. Ear acupuncture

TABLE 1. ACUPUNCTURE POINTS FOR MENSTRUAL CRAMPS

<i>Peripheral points</i>	<i>Local points</i>	<i>Lower Jiao</i>	<i>Pulse</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Herbs</i>
<i>Chong Mai:</i> SP 4, MH 6, ST 30	<i>Front:</i> CV 4, 6 KI 13, ST 28, 29 Uterus & Tituo	Cold	Slow, taut, or choppy	CV 4, 8, ST 28, 29, BL 23, GV 4 (moxa/TDP lamp), KI 3, ST 36, SP 8, 10	Women’s Journey
<i>Ren Mai:</i> LU7, KI 6		Medium	Tense	LI 4, LV 3, CV 6, SP 6, 8, GB 34	Women’s Rhythm
<i>Qi Stagnation:</i> LV 3, LI 4, SP 6	<i>Back:</i> GV 4 BL 23, 32, 52 (47)	Hot	Rapid, tense, or slippery	LV 2, 3, 8, SP 6, CV 3, BL 32, KI 6, 10	Unlocking

TDP, Teding Dianeibo Pu, loosely translates to special electromagnetic spectrum.

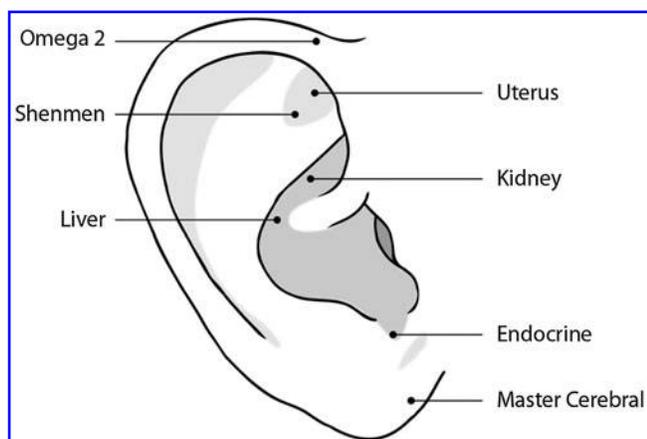


FIG. 1. Auricular acupoints for addressing menstrual cramps. Graphics were designed by Richard Greenwood, MA (www.richardgreenwood.ca).

points can be added and the patient can be sent home with a few tacks in place (see Fig. 1). Points to look for include Liver, Kidney, Endocrine, Uterus, Shenmen, Master Cerebral, and Omega 2.³

Herbs are also a useful adjunct. Yunnan Baiyao, a patent formula, is good for acute pain. In between menstrual periods, a more constitutionally based formula can be chosen. For example, for Qi Stagnation try Tong Yu Jian and Si Wu Tang (Women's Rhythm: Kan Herbs); for Stagnation with Cold try Wen Jing Tang (Women's Journey: Kan Herbs); and for Stagnation with Heat try Unlocking (Health Concerns). A detailed discussion of herbs is beyond the scope of this contribution, but can be found elsewhere.⁴

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AS A CLASSICAL FIVE-ELEMENT ACUPUNCTURE PRACTITIONER, the thrust of my treatment is to identify and remove any and all of a patient's energetic blocks and support the Causative Factor (CF) element, with moxabustion (unless contraindicated because of hypertension) and needle tonification (unless the patient's pulses are hyper). This alone will, in the majority of cases, resolve the symptoms.

There are, in addition, points on the Conception Vessel (Ren), which can be used on patients with any elemental CF, and which have a particular effectiveness for treating menstrual cramps. Typically, I would select, perhaps, one of the following points in a given treatment, followed by appropriate points on the patient's CF meridians:

- *CV (Ren) 3 Utmost Middle*—As its name implies, this point affects a patient at her center. Symptomatically, addressing this point tends to resolve pain in the lower abdomen, remove Blood Stasis, and encourage free flow through the area.
- *CV (Ren) 4 First Gate*—Gates open and close, as needed, to allow for free flow of Blood and energy. When a gate is jammed and flow is thereby impaired or blocked, pain often follows. This gate, located in the lower abdomen, is useful in resolving any problem of flow or movement through the lower Jiao.
- *CV (Ren) 5 Stone Gate*—This gate must also open and close to allow for free flow through the lower Jiao. As the Alarm Point of the Three Heater, it is especially useful for balancing Heat in the area. A proper amount of warmth encourages proper flow. Excess Heat or Cold can, of itself, be a cause of menstrual pain.

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CRAMPS CAN BE A PAINFUL PART of the menstrual cycle. For some women, the presence of cramps is a monthly warning that signals the coming of their periods. This type of cramping, also called dysmenorrhea, can be accompanied by nausea, vomiting, low-back pain, leg pain, and other forms of premenstrual discomfort. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), cramps are caused by some type of Qi and Blood imbalance.

In my practice, I try to determine first whether the cramping is caused by Excess or Deficiency by palpation of the painful area. Simply put, if applied pressure increases

the cramping pain, then an Excess condition is identified. If applied pressure alleviates the cramping pain, then a Deficient condition exists. Next, the patient is asked whether the pain is diffuse or fixed, which are typical of Qi or Blood Stagnation, respectively. I also palpate across the entire abdomen to detect if a mass or conglomeration of tissue is present. All throughout the palpation, I feel the temperature of the abdomen and notice the color, texture, and turgor of the skin.

Finally, I look at the patient's tongue and finish with any other questions that may further assist my TCM diagnosis. Given that every patient is different and point combinations are particular to each individual, point prescriptions will differ. Below, is a list of the acupoints that comprise a starting point for my treatment of menstrual cramps:

- SP 6—This is the meeting point of 3 lower Yin (Spleen, Kidney, and Liver). SP 6 courses Liver Qi, nourishes Blood, and eliminates Stasis.
- KI 5—This is the Xi-Cleft point of the Kidney channel for acute, painful menses; KI 5 regulates the lower Jiao and stops abdominal pain.
- SP 8—This is the Xi-Cleft point of the Spleen channel for acute, painful menses; SP 8 regulates Qi, Blood, and the Uterus.
- CV 6—This point Tonifies and regulates Qi.
- UB 17—This is the Influential point of Blood; UB 17 nourishes and invigorates Blood.

All points are needled bilaterally and stimulated until De Qi, and #34 (0.22 mm) needles are used for body points. I treat the patient at the onset of her cramping. I stimulate needles for De Qi 10 minutes after insertion and then retain needles for 25 minutes. I repeat within 2 days, if the patient's pain persists.

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GYNECOLOGY WAS DEVELOPED VERY EARLY in pre-modern Chinese medicine and was called Fu Ke or Nu Ke. The most premodern Chinese medicine book about this matter is named *Fu Qing Zhu Nu Ke*.¹ Many of the Fu Ke prescriptions used today came from this textbook, as well as the Fu Ke disease mechanisms and patterns differentiation theories. Fu Qing became one of the most prominent medicine doctors in this area of medicine.

Chinese medicine describes menstrual bleeding as the interaction among Shen, Xue, Jing, and Qi in the Uterus,

where human life begins. In the moment of conception, body (form) and soul (Shen) develops up to the development of the Tian gui to produce a continuum in the transmission of essence from our distant ancestors.

In systemic correspondences, Shen moves the Heart, to move the Xue as an Emperor messenger through the whole kingdom of the body; and Blood is the red liquid that transports the Jing (essence from the Kidneys) and Qi (energy from the Lungs), which is drained and dispersed thru the body, using the liver energy. So, during my patient evaluation, I need to determine the nature of the unbalance, because any one of the 5 Zangs and 6 Fus would be compromised, thus, producing menstrual cramps. It is very important to use the approach of the 8 principles to establish the pattern of disharmony to resolve the patient's unbalance.

The disharmony patterns among Shen, Xue, Jing, and Jinye will produce menstrual cramps (Jing Shui Lai Fu Xian Teng or Xin Jing Hou Shao Fu Teng Tong). These cramps could be the result of Cold or Heat, Excess or Deficiency, and most probably an inside pattern. The Liver's Heat condenses the Blood, not permitting to it drain adequately to the Uterus; sometimes the amount of the Liver's Blood is scanty and will not be delivered adequately to the Uterus. There are occasions when Shen hyperactivity (as elation) or Shen hypoactivity (as no motivation) develops problems when attempting to send Blood to the womb. Stagnant Qi produces pain when there is no Blood to move the Qi, or manifests in a Cold pattern, when Blood does not transport Qi. Sometimes, the Kidney's Blood Deficiency does not allow Wood development, and the Spleen struggles, producing Qi counterflow. If Chong and Rem were invaded by Damp and/or Cold, the patient would develop lower abdominal pain 3–5 days before menstrual bleeding.

Some points to be used include:

- Sea of Blood (V11, St37 or St39), C7 to disperse Heat, Rem 4 to separate clear fluids from turbid ones
- Rem 3 and K 12 to disperse Heat from the inferior Jiao and improve uterus function.
- Liv 3, ST 36, B 5 to disperse Damp
- IG 11 to improve Qi motion
- PC 6 to lower Yang hyperactivity
- R7 to improve Kidney Yin,
- B 6 to improve Yin motion;
- GB 43 to improve Liver Yin
- B 4 and PC 6 to open Chong mai
- P 7 R 6 to open Rem mai
- Rem 17 to improve Qi motion
- H 8 to improve Liver Yin
- SP 10 Sea of Blood, ST 40 to purge Phlegm.
- Ear points such as Shen Men, Uterus, Ovaries, Hips, Liver, Spleen, Kidney, and Point 0; as well as Extra points such as Zhon Qing.

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I HAVE BEEN USING Neiguan-Pericardium 6 and Xingjian-Liver 2 for patients with acute menstrual bleeding and cramps for many years, and this combination has yet to fail to produce rapid relief of symptoms. I had heard of these points from a colleague many years ago at a conference, and am sorry that I do not recall the name of the physician.

It is easy to see why LR 2 would apply. Deadman states:

The Liver stores the blood, and the Liver channel converges with the Conception vessel in the lower abdomen at Qugu REN-2, Zhongji REN-3, and Guanyuan REN-4. Liver fire can easily transmit to the uterine blood and induce wild and reckless flow, manifesting as ceaseless uterine bleeding, menorrhagia and early menstruation. ...¹

We usually think of PC 6 as affecting the chest and upper and middle Jiaos, but this point does connect with the lower Jiao as well, and a very interesting article online by Subhuti Dharmananda, PhD, discusses modern references regarding the use of PC 6 to enhance the effects of other acupuncture points, especially in treatments involving just a few needles.² (This is thus a "Pearl" for other conditions as well).

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WHEN A WOMAN COMES INTO MY OFFICE complaining about menstrual cramps, I want to know how long she has been suffering and at what point in her menstrual cycle the pain occurs.

Most women have had cramps for as long as they can remember, and they start just prior to bleeding, ceasing involuntarily after the first day or two. For other women, cramps occur during and/or after the menstrual flow. In Chinese medicine, it is considered more of a Liver Qi Stagnation with a possible Blood Stagnation if cramping occurs prior to the menses. If cramps start after a couple of days of blood flow, they may be due to Liver Blood Deficiency.

For nearly every case, I use SP 6 to aid the Blood and ground the energy. I also tend to use ST 36 to help boost the immune system, thereby allowing the body to help itself. I also universally use PC 6 to calm her.

For Liver Qi Stagnation, I use LR 3 and LI 4, and LR 14 or LR 13, if 14 is inside or too close to breast tissue.

For Blood Deficiency, I use SP 10 or LR 8, depending upon which organ needs more work. I also use HT 7 to facilitate blood flow and clear thinking.

I additionally, strongly suggest exercise such as yoga or Qigong and I urge Blood Deficient women; to eat grass-fed red meat and drink a glass of red wine.

Often, I will use the classic Xiao Yao San formula to help move the Qi and Blood. Sometimes, if the Stagnation is great, I will use Shen Tong Xue Yu Tang to actively move Blood downward and clear the Blood channels.

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