

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for endometriosis

This summary of key findings from *Volume 28: Endometriosis*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

- what endometriosis is
- current treatments
- findings from research into classical Chinese medicine literature and modern Chinese medicine clinical studies.

What is endometriosis?

Endometriosis is a condition in which endometrial tissue (the tissue that lines the uterus) grows outside the uterus.² Endometriosis affects up to 10% of women of reproductive age.² It can cause pain, abnormal menstruation and infertility.

Current treatments

Endometriosis requires a life-long management plan that may include hormone and pain medicines to relieve symptoms.² Surgery may also be used to remove lesions, but does not prevent recurrence.² Clinical guidelines highlight that the benefits and harms of non-medical treatments, such as Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture, are unclear.²

Chinese medicine treatment options include Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, ear acupuncture, moxibustion, and dietary and lifestyle advice. Chinese medicine practitioners prescribe treatments according to the patient's symptoms and relevant clinical textbooks and guidelines, research and clinical experience.

Classical Chinese medicine literature

The *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Zhong Hua Yi Dian)* is a large and important collection of more than 1,100 Chinese medicine books. It includes

707 citations that describe the treatment of endometriosis symptoms.

Most citations (97%) described oral Chinese herbal medicine. Topical Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, moxibustion and massage were less frequently described.

Many Chinese herbal medicines described in the classical literature were unnamed formulas. None of the Chinese herbal medicine formulas recommended in clinical guidelines and textbooks were found in the classical literature, but many were tested in clinical trials.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Endometriosis*¹ monograph, five English-language and four Chinese-language databases were searched in November 2018. This search found 466 relevant studies of Chinese medicine treatments for endometriosis, of which 299 were randomised controlled trials, 48 were non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 119 were non-controlled studies.

An additional search of the International Clinical Trials Registry Platform in April 2024 identified only two new published registered randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine.

Chinese herbal medicine

Most studies (279) were randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine. Oral Chinese herbal medicine was investigated more often than topical Chinese herbal medicines.

Evidence from randomised controlled trials showed that oral Chinese herbal medicine probably reduces period pain more than no treatment, and it may reduce period pain more than hormone medicine. There is

limited evidence on whether oral Chinese herbal medicine can improve pelvic pain, pain during sex and live birth rates.

It is unclear whether oral Chinese herbal medicine plus hormone medicine is more effective than hormone medicine alone in reducing period pain, pelvic pain and pain during sex. The combination may slightly reduce endometriosis recurrence after surgery, but it did not increase live birth rates. Formulas that may improve symptoms and reduce the chance of recurrence after treatment when combined with hormone medicine are *Xue fu zhu yu tang* and *Gui zhi fu ling jiao nang*.

Like all drugs, Chinese herbal medicine may have side effects. In randomised controlled trials, there were fewer side effects with oral Chinese herbal medicine than in the control groups. Gastrointestinal symptoms and menstrual irregularities were the most frequent side effects.

Acupuncture and related therapies

Eight randomised controlled trials tested the effects of manual acupuncture and two tested moxibustion for endometriosis.

Acupuncture may improve pelvic pain and pain during sex more than sham acupuncture, but it is unclear whether it improves period pain. At the end of treatment, acupuncture was as effective as hormone medicine in reducing the chance of having period pain or pain during sex.

The risk of recurrence was similar when moxibustion was combined with hormone medicine compared with hormone medicine alone. However, recurrence was more likely among people who received moxibustion alone compared with those who received hormone medicine alone. These findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of included studies.

Studies published since the original monograph search have also been reviewed,³ but evidence on the effectiveness of acupuncture and moxibustion remains limited.

Bruising and discomfort were the main side effects reported in acupuncture clinical studies, while minor burns were reported in moxibustion clinical trials.

Key messages

- Oral Chinese herbal medicine was the most frequently described Chinese medicine treatment for endometriosis-like symptoms in past eras.
- Treatment approaches appear to have changed over time.
- Oral Chinese herbal medicine may reduce some types of endometriosis-related pain.
- Acupuncture may reduce pelvic pain and pain during sex, but more research is needed.
- Clinicians and patients should discuss the potential risks and benefits, so patients can make informed choices about their care.

For more information

You can find out more about Chinese medicine for endometriosis in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 28: Endometriosis*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/12553>

To find out more about Chinese medicine research at the China–Australia International Centre for Chinese Medicine, visit www.rmit.edu.au/research/centres-collaborations/multi-partner-collaborations/cairccm

References

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2. Becker CM et al. (2022) ESHRE guideline: endometriosis. *Hum Reprod Open* 2022(2): hoac009.
3. Wang et al. (2023) Acupuncture and moxibustion for endometriosis: A systematic review and analysis. *Comp Ther Med* 76: 102963.

Disclaimer

This evidence summary is not intended as a guide for self-medication or medical advice – patients should seek professional advice from qualified Chinese medicine practitioners.