

Moxibustion

by Damian Carey

Overview



Moxibustion is the practice of burning a herb on or close to the body in order to generate specific therapeutic effects. The herb that is used is *Artemesia Vulgaris*, commonly known as Mugwort. The leaves of the mugwort plant are dried and refined to remove the rough stems and the resulting compound, which is known as moxa or moxa punk, has a soft and fluffy consistency which is readily moulded and burns smoothly. The degree of refinement of the moxa punk determines a range of qualities: the most refined moxa punk is a pale golden yellow, it is very dry and fluffy, has few impurities and it ignites readily and burns evenly with very little smoke and a pleasant smell; the less refined moxa is darker and greener, it has thicker fibres and a coarser consistency and generates a harsher smoke.

The practice of moxibustion has a long history. The early references to moxibustion practice are from two thousand year old Chinese texts and *Artemesia Vulgaris* has been cultivated in both China and Japan for many centuries. There is no doubt that the practice of warming the human body to relieve illnesses and discomforts would have coincided with the mastery of fire making, far back in our historical development. The practice of moxibustion is a specific refinement of that innate activity.

It should be noted that the practice of moxibustion in China, whilst common, is less highly regarded as compared to acupuncture practice and their range of moxibustion techniques limited. In Japan, however, moxibustion is very highly regarded and their range of moxibustion techniques is far more developed. As a therapy in its own right, combined with the full perspective of Oriental Medicine, moxibustion is regarded in some Japanese schools as being of equal or even greater value to the use of acupuncture needling. Its ability to tonify or nourish the internal organs, via the channels and points on the surface of the body, certainly makes it an invaluable enhancement for the immune system and defender against disease.

The fundamental principle involved in moxibustion is **the promotion of blood circulation**. The body has a homeostatic requirement for maintaining a fixed temperature; when an area on the surface of the body is warmed in excess of other areas, the body needs to ensure that no over-heating occurs, so it responds by dilating the blood vessels and increasing the flow of blood in the heated area. This increase in blood flow automatically enhances the vitality of the local tissues because the blood brings more nourishment and oxygen to the cells, eliminates more carbon dioxide (and therefore disperses the acidity of the local tissues) and brings more of the immune defending cells such as phagocytes and lymphocytes to the area. So just as with acupuncture, the application of moxibustion has an immune enhancing effect; the body responds to the stimulus by increasing the vitality of the local tissues. This simple, local principle is further enhanced by the ability of moxibustion to effect not only distal areas but also specific functional systems of the body, in other words the organ systems and the channels of Chinese Medicine.



Direct Moxibustion Technique

Moxibustion can be applied in a wide variety of ways, either directly or indirectly. With direct moxibustion a cone of moxa punk is rolled or moulded and placed on the skin. The cone is lit at the top and burns down slowly, allowing a gradually increasing penetration of heat through the skin. When the patient feels the heat intensifying, the practitioner quickly removes the cone before it leads to burning.

Indirect Moxibustion



With indirect moxibustion the moxa is burnt close to the skin. This may be done by using a cone of moxa, as described above, which is insulated from the skin with a layer of ginger or garlic or salt. Alternately, a lump of moxa can be placed on the head of an acupuncture needle after insertion into an acupuncture point. When this is burnt it transmits heat along the needle shaft and deep into the tissues where it relaxes and tonifies the muscle tissue.

Moxa Sticks

Moxa sticks, which resemble cigars, provide a very flexible way of directing heat into the body. When the tip of the stick is burnt the glowing end can be directed close to the surface of the body, allowing a warming effect over a wider area. This is very useful for treating fresh, not-yet-healed scars or damaged areas of skin; it is also useful for warming joints and promoting blood production when applied to relevant acupuncture points.

Charcoal

Moxa sticks also come in the form of charcoal that is blended with the traditional herb. Specially shaped pieces of charcoal are also used as a needle head application. Charcoal moxa is very convenient as it has a mild smell but no smoke.



Effects

Most of the research data on the effects of moxibustion have come from Japan in the first half of the 20th century. A notable early researcher was Doctor Shimetaro Hara who applied Rice Grain Moxibustion to himself at St 36 on a daily basis and who just happened to become the oldest practising physician at over 100 years of age. His research showed that the application of rice grain moxibustion increased the white blood cell (WBC) count in adults. The WBC peaked eight hours after application and remained high for three days. Various other studies showed, amongst other things, that moxibustion:

- increased red blood cell count
- reduced and then rapidly increased platelet count
- increased blood sugar levels
- reduced blood clotting time
- reduced acidosis
- reduced cholesterol
- increased blood flow
- improved peristaltic action in the gastro-intestinal tract
- enhanced liver function

In addition to these more scientific descriptions, we can say that the practice of moxibustion leads to an increase in relaxation and well being in the patient and enhances the effect of acupuncture treatment. It is particular valuable for joint and back pain and for tonifying or nourishing those people with moderate or serious levels of deficiency.

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*Damian Carey is a Doctor of Chinese Medicine, practicing in South Australia.
He is a member of the Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association
and is registered by AHPRA as a Chinese Medicine Practitioner.
He can be contacted by phone on 0421 599 841
or by email on damiansmedicine@gmail.com*