



# Progress in the Treatment of Chronic Urticaria with Acupuncture and External Auricular Point Therapy

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## Abstract

By reviewing relevant literature on the treatment of chronic urticaria (CU) with acupuncture and auricular point therapy in recent years, this paper summarizes the research progress in the treatment of chronic urticaria with acupuncture and auricular point therapy. It demonstrates that acupuncture and auricular point therapy have favorable curative effects in treating chronic urticaria and possess certain advantages over other treatment methods. Additionally, it briefly explores their mechanisms of action. However, further research is needed to comprehensively evaluate their efficacy, mechanisms of action, and safety.

## Keywords

Acupuncture; Auricular point; Chronic urticaria; Review

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## 1. Introduction

Urticaria is a highly prevalent clinical skin condition, with statistics indicating that approximately 15% of the population will experience at least one episode of urticaria in their lifetime <sup>[1]</sup>. Urticaria often presents acutely, with wheals appearing in various forms, leaving no trace after subsiding, and characterized by recurrent episodes and a protracted course that is difficult to resolve <sup>[2]</sup>. Chronic urticaria (CU) refers to the persistent or intermittent occurrence of skin wheals lasting more than six weeks <sup>[3]</sup>. CU can affect individuals of all ages, with an estimated incidence rate of approximately 0.5% to 1%, showing no obvious seasonal patterns <sup>[4]</sup>. This condition is currently

challenging to cure, causing intense skin itching during episodes that significantly disrupts normal work and life <sup>[5]</sup>. Modern medicine suggests that the pathogenesis of CU involves the activation of mast cells through both immune and non-immune mechanisms, triggering localized or systemic edema reactions in the skin <sup>[6]</sup>. At present, conventional Western medical treatments for CU lack effective approaches, primarily focusing on oral medications to reduce recurrence and alleviate itching, often utilizing antihistamines. However, CU is characterized by its persistent nature and high likelihood of recurrence upon discontinuation of medication <sup>[7]</sup>. In recent years, external treatments in traditional Chinese

medicine (TCM) have demonstrated promising results in treating CU, with acupuncture and auricular therapy showing particularly notable efficacy. This article provides an overview of recent advancements in the external treatment of CU using acupuncture and auricular therapy.

## 2. Understanding of the etiology and pathogenesis of chronic urticaria in traditional Chinese medicine

Urticaria was referred to as “Chizhen” (red rash), “Yinzhen” (hidden rash), “Youfeng” (wandering wind), etc. by ancient people. This disease is mostly caused by external invasion of pathogenic wind, disharmony between nutrient and defense Qi, and abnormal dissemination and distribution of Qi, blood, and body fluids, leading to recurrent itching <sup>[4]</sup>. “Synopsis of Prescriptions of the Golden Chamber” states, “When pathogenic Qi invades the meridians, the body develops rashes and hidden rashes” <sup>[8]</sup>. Although chronic urticaria manifests on the skin and mucous membranes, it is closely related to the dysfunction of various internal organs. The primary characteristic of individuals with a special constitution is congenital insufficiency and acquired malnutrition, along with irregular daily routines, which lead to frequent allergic reactions. Ancient literature defines the meaning of “Bing” (endowment) in the special constitution as “innate endowment”, “fetal endowment” etc., indicating that a person’s growth and development are influenced by what is bestowed by their parents. Individuals with a special constitution have abnormal endowments compared to ordinary people, making them more susceptible to external environmental influences and prone to developing diseases due to environmental stimuli <sup>[9]</sup>. “Essentials of Medicine” points out that dysfunction of the internal organs in the human body, prolonged illness leading to blood deficiency and dryness, are important causes of hidden rashes and itching due to internal organ disharmony. Moreover, the most common syndrome type of hidden rashes is blood deficiency and wind-dryness. Patients with this condition often have a deficient constitution, weakened nutrient and defense Qi, and poorly nourished skin, resulting in persistent skin lesions that are difficult to heal. In the later stages, they

may experience various symptoms such as hot palms and soles, irritability, and easy anger <sup>[10]</sup>. The ability to resist external pathogens decreases, lung defense function becomes impaired, external pathogens invade internally, and nutrient and defense Qi become imbalanced, leading to wind rash and itching <sup>[11]</sup>. When the body’s defensive Qi is weakened, external pathogenic factors can invade, leading to a struggle between the body’s defensive Qi and external pathogens at the skin’s surface, resulting in itching and wheals <sup>[12]</sup>. Given the characteristics of chronic urticaria, external treatment methods in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) are highly suitable for addressing this condition. By employing corresponding TCM external treatment techniques, such as acupuncture or auricular point stimulation at specific areas on the body’s surface, we can induce local capillary congestion and dilation, trigger nerve reflexes, open sweat glands to induce sweating, and expel external pathogens, thereby harmonizing the body’s defensive and nutritive Qi. External TCM treatments like acupuncture and auricular therapy demonstrate favorable clinical efficacy in treating chronic urticaria by directly targeting the underlying pathogenesis.

## 3. Clinical application of acupuncture in chronic urticaria

Acupuncture therapy, a classic external treatment method in TCM, involves stimulating specific acupoints on the body to regulate the flow of defensive and nutritive Qi and blood. Acupuncture treatments come in various forms, offering unique advantages by directly addressing the root cause of the disease while simultaneously treating its symptoms. “Urticaria” is considered a condition of deficiency in origin and excess in superficiality, where factors such as overeating and emotional stress can lead to internal invasion by wind pathogens, disrupting the normal flow of Qi, blood, and body fluids, resulting in stagnation and blockage. Acupuncture therapy can swiftly alleviate and improve patients’ discomfort with few adverse reactions and a low recurrence rate, thanks to its diverse, flexible, and convenient treatment methods. Modern research suggests that acupuncture therapy can suppress inflammatory responses, thereby promoting and regulating cellular and humoral immunity.

He Jin et al. randomly divided patients with chronic urticaria (CU) into three groups: the monotherapy group received oral levocetirizine hydrochloride, the dual-therapy group received oral levocetirizine hydrochloride combined with Runzao Zhiyang Capsules, and the triple-therapy group received acupuncture treatment in addition to the dual-therapy regimen<sup>[13]</sup>. For CU patients, combining Runzao Zhiyang Capsules and/or acupuncture with a double conventional dose of levocetirizine hydrochloride was administered. The results indicated that the combined therapy supplemented with acupuncture could further enhance the overall response rate. Hu Changhe treated the study group with Yangxue Xiaofeng Decoction combined with acupuncture, while the control group received mizolastine<sup>[14]</sup>. The overall response rate was 90.91% in the study group and 65.91% in the control group, demonstrating the favorable efficacy of acupuncture in treating chronic urticaria. Wang Hui et al. randomly divided patients into a control group (oral desloratadine citrate disodium tablets) and an observation group (vitamin B12 injection at bilateral Quchi acupoint in addition to the control group's treatment) according to a random number table<sup>[15]</sup>. Both groups were treated for 30 days and followed up for 2 months. Clinical efficacy, recurrence rate during follow-up, Urticaria Activity Score (UAS) before treatment and at 10, 20, and 30 days of treatment, as well as serological and other test indicators before and 30 days after treatment, were compared between the two groups. The results showed that this acupuncture treatment could reduce the recurrence rate and alleviate inflammatory responses. Wang Mengli et al. adopted the treatment of chronic urticaria of Qi-blood deficiency type by combining governor vessel moxibustion with acupuncture at Dong's extraordinary points<sup>[16]</sup>. The needles were retained for about 15 minutes, once every two weeks, with three sessions constituting a course of treatment, and a total of three courses were administered continuously. The overall effective rate was 94.29%. This demonstrated that the treatment of chronic urticaria with governor vessel moxibustion combined with acupuncture at Dong's extraordinary points was simple in method and unique in efficacy. Jia Jingli et al. administered oral ebastine to the control group; the treatment group received acupuncture treatment (at points such as Quchi and Hegu) in addition to the treatment

given to the control group, using the filiform needle acupuncture technique<sup>[17]</sup>. The results showed that the treatment group had better efficacy than the control group, and the recurrence rate after one month of follow-up was lower than that of the control group. The conclusion was that the acupuncture therapy combined with ebastine had a lower recurrence rate and better efficacy in the treatment of chronic urticaria.

#### 4. Clinical application of auricular point therapy in chronic urticaria

Auricular point therapy has a long history in the treatment of skin diseases such as chronic urticaria. Its therapeutic mechanism lies in the stimulation of corresponding acupoints through auricular acupressure with beans, which helps to dredge the meridians and regulate Qi and blood<sup>[18]</sup>. By stimulating specific skin sensory areas on the ear, auricular points can regulate various functions of the human body, including the nervous, humoral, and endocrine systems<sup>[19]</sup>. Auricular points are the reaction points of diseases on the ear<sup>[20]</sup>. Traditional Chinese medicine holds that the ears are closely related to the twelve meridians and five internal organs of the human body. The auricle and the nervous system originate from the same ectoderm. Auricular therapy induces a series of reactions by stimulating the sensory points on the ear's skin and transmitting nerve messages. Through auricular therapy, stimulating the auricular points corresponding to the affected internal organs and meridians in the human body can have the effects of calming the nerves, lowering and normalizing blood pressure, relieving pain, and improving and promoting various immune functions of the human body. Auricular plaster therapy has a definite curative effect on urticaria<sup>[21]</sup>. Auricular therapy has numerous advantages, including convenience, ease of operation, high cost-effectiveness, affordability, minimal side effects, minimal patient discomfort, and no damage to the ear's skin, making it easily acceptable to patients. Moreover, it does not interfere with the patient's normal work and life during treatment<sup>[22]</sup>. Modern anatomy suggests that the auricle is innervated by multiple nerves, and thus auricular therapy has various effects such as relieving spasms, alleviating pain, relieving itching, and reducing allergies<sup>[23]</sup>.

Wei Ruixian et al. utilized acupoint catgut embedding combined with auricular point pressing with beans for the treatment of chronic urticaria (CU), achieving an effectiveness rate of 82.14% <sup>[20]</sup>. This demonstrates that the combined therapy of acupoint catgut embedding and auricular point pressing with beans is clinically effective for treating CU, with a low recurrence rate, excellent long-term efficacy, and good treatment safety. Zou Tian administered acupuncture treatment to the treatment group and acupuncture combined with auricular point pressing with beans to the control group <sup>[24]</sup>. The results indicated that acupuncture combined with auricular point pressing with beans significantly improved the clinical symptoms of CU and exhibited high safety. Wang Hongjian et al. treated the control group solely with autohemotherapy at acupoint injection, while the treatment group received additional auricular therapy based on the control group's treatment <sup>[21]</sup>. The results after treatment showed that auricular point pressing combined with autohemotherapy at acupoint injection had a better clinical effect on treating chronic urticaria. Liu Binbin provided the treatment group with auricular point pressing combined with external application of purslane, while the control group received oral Western medication <sup>[25]</sup>. The results demonstrated that auricular point pressing combined with external application of purslane had a good therapeutic effect on CU. Li Gang et al. administered a comprehensive treatment to the treatment group, consisting of modified Duopi Decoction combined with auricular seed embedding and cetirizine hydrochloride drops, while the control group received only cetirizine hydrochloride drops <sup>[23]</sup>. The results showed that the clinical efficacy of the treatment group was superior to that of the control group, indicating that the combined therapy of modified Duopi Decoction, auricular seed embedding, and cetirizine hydrochloride drops was significantly effective in treating

chronic urticaria and had a low recurrence rate.

## 5. Summary and prospects

In summary, chronic urticaria is a common skin disease that is clinically difficult to treat, and Western antihistamine medications have limitations <sup>[26]</sup>. The recurrent episodes of chronic urticaria are closely related to psychological factors such as anxiety and irritability in patients, as well as social environmental factors. These factors can interfere with normal nervous, humoral immune, endocrine, and other systems, serving as significant contributors to the recurrent and protracted nature of the disease, thereby making chronic urticaria a psychosomatic disorder. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) external treatment methods such as acupuncture and auricular therapy have demonstrated favorable clinical outcomes in treating chronic urticaria. With a wide range of treatment options available, whether through acupuncture alone, auricular therapy alone, or comprehensive treatment approaches, satisfactory clinical efficacy can be achieved with a relatively low recurrence rate, highlighting the unique advantages of TCM external treatment methods. However, based on clinical literature analysis, given the complex and diverse range of treatments such as acupuncture and auricular therapy, there is currently a limited number of studies that can be included for analysis, with a lack of long-term efficacy follow-up and other observations. There is also a dearth of rigorous randomized controlled research methods, and systematic and comprehensive evaluations of adverse reactions and safety have not been conducted. Further relevant analyses and studies are needed in the future to screen for safe, effective, highly operable, and easily acceptable acupuncture and auricular therapy programs for the treatment of chronic urticaria.

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### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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