



## Using acupuncture for insomnia

### When Pins and Needles Help You Sleep

*By Jane Palmer*

When Michelle Dodd's newborn developed severe acid reflux, the typical six weeks of interrupted sleep extended to nearly a year as her baby needed to snack almost continuously. After nine torturous months the digestive problem resolved—but for Dodd, the challenges had just begun.

“By then the baby was sleeping but I was not,” says Dodd, who runs Skipping Girl Design, a Web-design company in Boulder. The incident precipitated three years of grueling insomnia for Dodd, who tried both medications and sleep therapy to no avail. “My quality of life was abysmal and I was the sort of person you didn't want to be around.”

In desperation, she visited a Boulder-based

acupuncturist who specializes in treating sleep disorders, including insomnia, narcolepsy, sleep apnea and children's bedwetting. Dodd was skeptical that pins and needles could help a problem that conventional medicine couldn't. But "in two weeks I got some relief, and within five or six months I was sleeping deeply and consistently through the night."



**Dr. Jake Fratkin, of Boulder, finds acupuncture "incredibly effective for sleep disorders, but it takes between six and 12 treatments."**

Dodd's experiences were typical, says Damiana Corca, who is one of the community of Boulder County acupuncturists that treat sleep issues. Most people see some alleviation of symptoms quite soon and can make a full recovery within a few months, she says. "Acupuncture is one of the least-known therapies for insomnia, but its success rate is high. And the best part about acupuncture is that once the results are achieved, the patient feels strong and confident and easily maintains their sleep."

## Consider the Source

Acupuncture originated in China thousands of years ago. In the last 50 years it has become popular in the West, where it is used to treat a variety of disorders such as migraines, sports injuries and hormonal imbalances. The treatment involves the insertion of very thin needles through the patient's skin at specific points on the body. According to traditional Chinese medical theory, acupuncture points are located on meridians through which vital energy runs.

Acupuncture treatment for insomnia typically involves a full examination and an assessment of the patient's condition before the needles go in. That's because a sleep disorder could have several root causes, according to Jake Paul Fratkin, who has practiced acupuncture for 37 years and has been honored as Acupuncturist of the Year by the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. Based on the patient's diagnosis, a practitioner will choose which acupuncture points to address, and may also recommend herbal remedies and lifestyle changes.

A course of treatment with Corca typically involves weekly treatments for 12 weeks or longer. In each session, Corca consults on the previous week's sleep patterns, takes the patient's pulse at various locations, and checks the patient's tongue and general health before deciding where to place the needles for the 30-minute duration. The causes of insomnia are a combination of mental, emotional, hormonal and neurological factors, and a combined response is what gives excellent and long-lasting results, Corca says. And when it comes to sleep, it is

about quality, not necessarily quantity—a good night’s sleep, to her, is when a patient feels rested the next day.

Most important of all is being able to reduce the tension and anxiety around sleep disorders, Corca says. “Some of the people I see feel fearful and dread the thought of sleep. The first thing I hear from some of my patients is that even if the sleep is not great yet, the anxiety lessens, and that in itself helps them fall back asleep easier.”

Modern Chinese literature also suggests that practitioners advise patients on calming the sources of anxiety, Fratkin says. This may include encouraging the patient to monitor for sources of irritation or worry, avoid caffeine or stimulation in the evenings, and get regular exercise.

## ‘A Demon of the Past’



Acupuncturists say that the treatment balances the body and aids sleep by altering brain chemistry and the release of neurotransmitters. It can also help restore the natural circadian rhythm and increase the production of melatonin and other substances that play crucial roles in regulating sleep and mood. Several local acupuncturists, along with Fratkin and

Corca, treat a wide range of sleep disorders with success.

At Southwest Acupuncture College in Gunbarrel, the campus clinic treats 800 to 1,000 patients a month, and insomnia is a chief complaint, according to campus director Susannah Neal. SWAC recently started a course on treating sleep disorders and asked Corca to teach it because of her training with Hamid Montakab, a physician and acupuncturist in Switzerland who has been doing research on acupuncture and sleep for more than 20 years. Corca hopes the course will help train a new generation of acupuncturists to treat insomnia and other sleep disorders effectively, adding to the expertise that exists in the local acupuncture community.

The approach has certainly worked for Dodd. Although her life is stressful, insomnia has become a demon of the past. Occasionally she has the odd night of interrupted sleep, but now she doesn't panic because she knows there's a solution at hand.

"People used to tell me that restful nights were over once I had a baby, but they were wrong," Dodd says. "Nowadays it's me who sleeps like a baby."

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## Links

Checking acupuncturists' websites will generally give you an idea of the conditions they specialize in or treat most often. If you are concerned about the cost of an intensive treatment plan, several Boulder County acupuncture clinics offer a sliding scale. Among them:

### **Boulder Community**

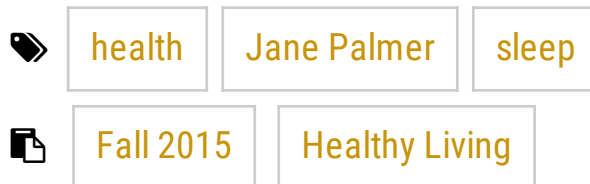
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Southwest Acupuncture College, Gunbarrel,  
[www.acupuncturecollege.edu](http://www.acupuncturecollege.edu)

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*Jane Palmer, a freelance science journalist and radio producer, lives in Eldorado Springs with her husband and daughter.*



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