

Shingles: How Acupuncture and Chinese Herbal Medicine Can Support Healing

By Dr Nicky MacDonald – HealthConnectSHEN

Recently, I experienced shingles myself. Like many people, I had previously treated patients with this condition, but experiencing it personally gave me an even deeper appreciation for how uncomfortable and disruptive it can be. The burning nerve pain, itching, and fatigue can be intense, and it reminded me how valuable acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine can be in supporting the body through viral conditions such as shingles.

What Is Shingles?

Shingles is caused by the Varicella Zoster virus, the same virus responsible for chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus remains dormant in the nervous system and may reactivate later in life. When it reactivates, it travels along nerve pathways and produces a painful rash or blistering eruption, typically affecting one side of the body.

- Burning or stabbing nerve pain
- Tingling or itching sensation
- A red rash followed by fluid-filled blisters
- Sensitivity of the skin
- Fatigue or flu-like symptoms

Why Does Shingles Occur?

Shingles often appears when the immune system is under pressure. Stress, fatigue, illness, hormonal change, or age-related immune decline can all contribute to viral reactivation. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), shingles is often associated with Damp Heat or Toxic Heat affecting the Liver and Gallbladder channels.

How Acupuncture Can Help

Acupuncture can be highly effective for shingles, particularly when treatment begins early. Treatment focuses on clearing heat, relieving nerve pain, reducing inflammation, supporting the immune system, and promoting faster healing of the skin.

Chinese Herbal Medicine

Chinese herbal medicine is often used alongside acupuncture. Herbal formulas are tailored to the individual and may help clear heat and viral toxicity, reduce inflammation, support immune function, and promote skin healing.

Preventing Postherpetic Neuralgia

One of the most difficult complications of shingles is postherpetic neuralgia, where nerve pain persists long after the rash resolves. Acupuncture can help calm irritated nerves, improve circulation, and support long-term nerve recovery.

TCM Practitioner Notes

Common Pattern: Liver & Gallbladder Damp Heat

Typical presentation includes burning rib■side pain, red blistering rash, irritability, thirst, and dark urine. Treatment focuses on clearing heat and resolving toxicity.

- Modified Long Dan Xie Gan Tang
- Long Dan Cao
- Huang Qin
- Zhi Zi
- Chai Hu
- Sheng Di Huang
- Dang Gui
- Ze Xie
- Mu Tong
- Gan Cao
- Additions: Jin Yin Hua, Lian Qiao, Ban Lan Gen, Zi Cao

Pattern: Toxic Heat

- Modified Huang Lian Jie Du Tang
- Pu Ji Xiao Du Yin
- Ban Lan Gen
- Da Qing Ye
- Zi Cao
- Mu Dan Pi

Pattern: Qi & Blood Stagnation (Post■Herpetic Neuralgia)

- Modified Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang
- Yan Hu Suo
- Chuan Lian Zi
- Ru Xiang
- Mo Yao

Common Acupuncture Points

- LI4 (He Gu) – moves Qi and clears heat
- LI11 (Qu Chi) – clears heat and inflammation
- LV3 (Tai Chong) – regulates Liver Qi
- GB34 (Yang Ling Quan) – benefits rib and flank pain
- SJ6 (Zhi Gou) – moves Shaoyang channel Qi
- SP10 (Xue Hai) – cools blood
- ST36 (Zu San Li) – supports immune function
- BL17 (Ge Shu) – moves blood

- GB41 (Zu Lin Qi) – clears channel heat

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