

Getting to the point: Patients with chronic sinus problems find long-sought relief in acupuncture

By Suzanne Laurent

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ANDOVER — Mike Palermo of Andover has suffered from allergies and sinus problems for more than a decade. So when his wife started complaining about his snoring, he suspected his sinuses could be the problem.

After reviewing Palermo's symptoms, David Sollars, a licensed acupuncturist and owner of FirstHealth in Andover, also suspected that his snoring might be caused by a sinus condition.

Sollars said that while antibiotics are effective in clearing bacterial sinus infections, people who suffer from chronic sinusitis can benefit from complementary treatments. In Palermo's case, he prescribed acupuncture.

To some people in our Western culture, acupuncture remains a mystery. But acupuncture and related medical treatments are more than 5,000 years old. Advocates are not surprised so many people are finding relief in this ancient art.

Traditional Chinese acupuncture usually is done by inserting very thin needles, sometimes in conjunction with electrical stimulus, into the skin at certain points on the body to stimulate energy flow along the body's pathways. That energy flow is called "qi" or "chi" (pronounced "chee").

Palermo, 43, said he initially kept his visit to the clinic a secret. "I didn't tell my wife I went there at first because I wanted to see if it worked," he said. "After a couple of weeks, she noticed that I wasn't snoring as much."

Ted Pappas, a licensed acupuncturist and owner of the Acupuncture Center of Andover, said the good news is that chronic sinusitis and another condition called nasopharyngitis (it causes chronic postnasal drip) are curable.

"It's one of those groups of conditions in the 90th percentile of success with acupuncture, Chinese herbs and home treatment," Pappas said.

Jason Henson, also an acupuncturist with First Health, said acupuncture is a very effective treatment for chronic sinus issues or acute episodes associated with the cold or seasonal changes.

"Sometimes the sinus infection can be bacterial, and from the Western perspective antibiotics work fine," Henson said. "If it's more of a chronic condition, acupuncture might help." Palermo said his allergies to certain grasses, trees and seafood began in his early 30s. "I used to take (over-the-counter decongestants) at least a couple of times a day," Palermo said. His recent treatments at First Health are the first alternative ones he has tried for a medical condition.

For two months, Palermo had two acupuncture treatments a week; now he goes once a week. He also uses a customized Chinese herbal remedy prepared for him at First Health. "When my sinuses are bad or my asthma kicks up, I use a tea made with Chinese herbs," he said. "I've been able to



David Sollars, owner of FirstHealth of Andover, performs a sinus acupuncture treatment on Mike Palermo, Staff photo

control my asthma very well since using the herbs." Palermo said he used to need an inhaler when working out, and carried it with him everywhere "just in case." Not anymore, however.

"Acupuncture increases circulation to the local area and helps decrease inflammation," Henson said concerning how the treatments help. "Sinuses can then drain."

Acupuncture also stimulates the immune system that helps to fight infection, he said. And sometimes, people feel better after just one treatment.

"A lot of people are congested and in pain," he said. "They feel relief right away when their sinuses open up."

Most patients receive acupuncture treatments two or three times a week for a couple of weeks to get over the acute phase, and then once a week for a few weeks.

"If there is a really serious condition, we also might try an individualized herbal prescription, as well," Henson said, as in Palermo's case. "We mix a powder of herbs into a tea or in a capsule form."

There are over 350 types of Chinese herbs and 10 to 15 of these may be chosen for a specific patient. Emma Campbell of Andover also has seen results from a personalized herbal remedy. Campbell, 52, had allergies but didn't want to take prescription medications. "I started with acupuncture and went three weeks for a couple of times a week," she said. "It helped right away."

That was two years ago. She has been taking the herbal remedy since.

"I kind of forget about the sinus issues," Campbell said. "Another great thing about herbs is that the formula is specific to the individual. Right now I suffer with hot flashes and the formula can be tweaked to add something to help with those." Henson may also suggest a home remedy for clients to follow using a neti pot. This is an Ayurvedic treatment that originated in India. It uses warm saline water to irrigate the nasal passages. The pot looks like a small teapot with a smoothly tapered conical tip at the spout end. The salted water is gently poured into one nostril at a time.

"This treatment doesn't affect the sinuses directly," Henson said. "It is designed to keep the nasal passages clear. Using the neti pot helps to keep the protective layer of mucus in the nostrils functioning properly."

Henson said this is most helpful when used daily as a preventive measure.

Pappas noted that people who simply treat the symptoms of chronic sinusitis or nasopharyngitis end up spending about \$1,200 on the average each year on medical appointments and medications, including nasal sprays.

"The nasal sprays are not good to use on a long-term basis," Pappas said. "They may become an irritant." Pappas said people can, instead, choose alternative treatment and spend around \$500 to \$600 for treatment over three or four months. "And then it's done," he said.

Palermo, vice-president of sales for a vending machine company, said his snoring has gone away. "I don't wake up during the night nearly as much as I used to," he said. "I'm more energetic and not as groggy in the morning."

