

## Acupuncture and Moxibustion Treatment for Shingles

by Kokubo Junzo

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a viral infection of the nerves which causes severe pain and rash in the affected skin areas. It is the same virus that causes chicken pox, and is a common complaint for acupuncturists treating pain-related ailments. Before the painful rash appears, it is often preceded with fever, chill and lethargy. Typically, a burning sensation is felt around the affected area as it turns red. This prodromal stage usually lasts for 3 to 4 days. Following the prodromal stage, a rash consisting of small fluid-filled blisters develops on the reddened skin areas. It is accompanied by excruciating pain. The blisters eventually dry and crust over after 5-7 days. The most commonly affected areas are the side of the trunk or around the ribs, and occasionally it affects the face and the head. If an optical nerve is affected and damaged, eye sight can be lost in some patients. It is not uncommon that the patient can suffer from severe pain for many weeks or months, or even years, after the blisters have healed completely. This is known as post herpetic neuralgia, or PHN. PHN can cause insomnia, erratic mood and depression in many patients.

Shingles can occur at any age, but people over the age of 50 are most commonly affected. It is said that once you get shingles, it should not occur again. Actually, shingles may recur when the virus is reactivated by a weakened immune system due to emotional and physical stress. If serious widespread shingles occurs, the therapist might suspect a hidden disease like cancer, AIDS or Hodgkin's disease.

When a patient visits you for treatment before the typical shingle blisters appear, or only when pain is felt, be careful not to misdiagnose and treat it as a simple neuralgia or intercostal neuralgia. If the shingles appear after your acupuncture treatment, you might be accused of causing that by the patient.

### Treatment

There is no specific treatment for shingles in modern medicine. Topical applications of corticosteroid creams or anesthetic patches are prescribed along with painkillers like aspirin and codeine, and anti-inflammatory medications that provide symptomatic relief. Acupuncture and moxibustion can be very effective for shingles if it is treated within six months after the onset of symptoms. They are not only effective for pain relief,

insomnia and depression, but also for strengthening the immune system so as to shorten recovery time. From my clinical experience, I would recommend moxibustion treatment for shingles, more so than acupuncture.

### Case Study

Female patient (age 73)

First visit: September 27, 2002.

Two months before her first visit, shingles appeared extensively on the right side of her neck, shoulder, chest, the right-half side of the breast down to the upper ribs. The rash completely healed with no trace of it, however, she has severe and constant pain (PHN) at all the times that cause insomnia, erratic moods and depression. She has been on medication prescribed by her doctor, but so far with no relief.

In my treatment, I use a combination of acupuncture and moxibustion. First I treat the main points on the whole body to improve the general condition, then I treat the shingles-affected area by inserting many acupuncture needles at random (roughly 2 cm apart from each needle) 5 mm deep. Those needles are left in while I apply soybean size moxa around them, also at random with chinetsu technique.

After the first session, the patient complained about several big bruises on the chest and breast areas caused by acupuncture revealing that she bruises easily. Since then, I have applied only moxibustion on these areas. After five sessions, the severe pain subsided by 80%, and her sleeping pattern became normal. After ten sessions that completed the series of treatment, her only complaint was a discomfort or minor aches in a localized area during weather changes. She now comes back once a month for health maintenance.

This case demonstrates that acupuncture and moxibustion treatments can be very effective for shingles or post herpetic neuralgia, if the treatment is started within six months after the onset of shingles. I think that it is difficult to get positive results after that period of time and I would therefore advise that you get the date of the onset of shingles during the first meeting with the patient.

*Kokubo Junzo, LAc graduated from the Tokyo College of Acupuncture and completed ten years of internship under Dr. K. Ohmura, a renowned Japanese acupuncturist. He is licensed to practice acupuncture in Japan, and has been practicing in Toronto since 1981. He is the Vice President of the Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Association of Canada, and a member of the Canadian Holistic Medical Association. He has appeared on Global TV and CTV, and has also been a guest speaker at the University of Toronto's Department of Medicine.*