

MAGIC OR MYTH – CAN YOU SLIM WITHOUT DIETING?

If you want to slim, is there an alternative to dieting?

Many people, fed up with the orthodox medical regime of a 'pill for every ill' are turning to alternative medicine and remedies such as acupuncture and hypnosis. But are they really useful for losing weight?

The ancient art of acupuncture (used in China for the past 2000 years) lies mostly in the hands of non-medical practitioners in this country. You can find their names in any copy of the Yellow Pages. But more and more doctors are finding it difficult to ignore the relief which inserting fine needles into 'pressure points' in the body can have on chronic pain sufferers and drug addicts.

Over a thousand doctors in Britain, in the Western style of medicine, now practice acupuncture in addition to conventional treatment. But they are extremely doubtful about its usefulness for those wishing to lose weight.

Acupuncture is thought to work by helping to release endorphins, the body's own natural painkillers. Research has suggested that the insertion of special acupuncture needles into the body stimulates the central nervous system. This causes the brain to produce morphine-like substances which doctors have found help relax the patient and reduce pain and tension considerably.

Scientific research is currently being carried out with drug addicts to see whether acupuncture helps and why. One theory is that the addict does not produce enough endorphins of his own, and craves morphine and other drugs to replace them. So acupuncture, which seems to help release more endorphins, could be useful.

The view that acupuncture could help to cure drug addicts has led to the suggestion that it could help control food addiction, too, says Dr Alexander Macdonald, former secretary of the British Medical Acupuncture Society. "Certain practitioners have jumped on the bandwagon by suggesting that acupuncture can help in weight loss, but I do not think that on its own it is of any value", he says.

Dr Macdonald is not convinced by a study conducted by a doctor in Finland, who used acupuncture with 18 men and women, who were all 20 per cent overweight. An acupuncture needle the size of a drawing pin was inserted into their ears, and the doctor gave them advice on obesity and diet, as well as putting them on a 1000 calorie per day diet. After six weeks, the average weight loss among men was 9.7 per cent and among women 8.2 per cent.

Follow-up results at 10 and 15 months showed the weight stayed off, too: the men had lost an average of 12 per cent, or 25.5lb, and the women 8.6 per cent, or 18lb.

Dr Macdonald believes the doctor's success was partly due to the diet and advice he gave patients, rather than the acupuncture, which he thinks may have the opposite effect with overweight people. Research with rats has suggested too many endorphins racing round the system can actually cause overweight.

He carried out an experiment to test the theory. "I practiced acupuncture on 10 of my patients who were all over 20st. I didn't change their diets at all, and the acupuncture had absolutely no effect except that some actually put on weight".

"I know some acupuncturists do have success with slimmers, but I think their success can be explained through a change in diet, or even the mere power of suggestion, rather than from the acupuncture itself".

The advice Dr Macdonald and other doctors give to slimmers who want to try acupuncture is. "Don't waste your money. Successful weight loss is due to the diet plan the practitioner puts you on, and not the acupuncture".

CASE HISTORY

Sally, a 38 year-old secretary, managed to lose 3st through a course of acupuncture, "My weight problem really started after the birth of my second baby, I was 15st and suffering from high blood pressure. I tried several diets and ended up putting on another half stone.

"A friend recommended acupuncture (and a reputable acupuncturist) for a gynecological problem, but as my acupuncturist thought my weight problem was glandular, as opposed to dietary, he treated me for that as well. He felt mine wasn't purely an eating problem, and that acupuncture would stimulate different organs in my body to make them work together. I was a little apprehensive when I first went for treatment, as I was unsure of what it would entail and whether it was going to be painful. But I found it quite relaxing, the acupuncturist explained exactly what he was doing as he inserted the needles and all I felt was a slight tingling sensation like a tiny electric shock, which wasn't at all painful. The effect was incredible: within four days I had lost 7lb, and I felt transformed. I didn't suffer hunger pangs any more and I felt more healthy and energetic. Even my hair and skin improved. It made me feel good about myself and gave me more confidence.

I combined the treatment with sensible eating, including lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and as little red meat as possible in my diet. After a year of one session a week, I lost 3st and my weight has stayed stable since I stopped having treatment six months ago.

hypnosis. Sometimes a woman will reach a plateau weight, in her diet, say 10st, and I ask her what was happening in her life the last time she was that weight. It can be linked to a problem which she has never talked about”.

After discussing with the client the particular eating problem Lydia begins by giving suggestions under hypnosis to break the habit.

For instance, she will suggest that although the client eats the same type of food at mealtimes, she will find that she needs to eat less, but that the amount will be just as appealing and satisfying.

Hypnosis is a ‘softly-softly’ approach to weight loss. No hypnotherapist worth her salt will tell a client that she must stick to a rigid diet, or will instantly stop eating certain foods. She also knows when to refer severe psychological problems to a doctor.

In the second stage of Lydia’s treatment she might suggest, again under hypnosis, that her client cuts out ‘picking’ at foods between meals when she feels worried or anxious, and occupies herself with some other activity.

In the third stage of hypnosis, the client might be told that she knows which foods are fattening, and that because of this, she automatically feels she does not want them.

Lydia begins treatment with a contract of six weekly sessions. “If we both feel the therapy is going in the right direction, I make a tape using my own voice, based on what we have done, which she can take away with her and use every day. After a month, we review the treatment together”.

Clients who have more severe emotional problems which are causing them to eat compulsively may need more intensive therapy. “Whatever slimming problem there is, I work on the basis of building confidence, and lowering anxiety”, says Lydia.

An increasing number of GPs are referring patients to hypnotherapists finding that rigid diet sheets and bald instructions to ‘lose weight’ are of no use.

You might want to try hypnosis in the battle with your willpower. But remember, as with other ways to permanent weight loss, it offers no short cuts. If you are serious about wanting to lose weight, you have to be serious about the method, whichever you choose.

CASE HISTORY 1

Eileen is a 59-year old mother of five, who was unsuccessful in losing weight through hypnosis. “I’ve been overweight all my life, and my weight has gradually crept up from 10st (when I got married) to my current weight of 20st.

“I have always been unhappy about putting on weight, and have tried most methods of slimming, from health farms to slimming pills, but the pounds always came back again. Eventually, I managed to get down to 10st again on a strict meal replacement micro diet, consisting of powders mixed into drinks, under hospital supervision. But once I started eating proper food again, back came the weight. It was then that I first tried hypnotherapy.

“I went with all the wrong expectations, thinking that the therapist could somehow give me the self control I lacked. I know how that hypnosis can only help you achieve what you have already decided to *do*. I was very resistant to this form of treatment, as I still resented that I couldn’t eat the things I liked. I was still looking on food as an answer to all my other problems, and this is why hypnosis didn’t help me.

“Eventually, I had psychotherapy treatment for depression, and it was only after this that my slimming began to be successful.

Be warned: there are quacks around”, she says. “Although I was lucky in getting professional treatment, I know how easy it is to be exploited. I rang one therapist and he guaranteed that I would lose weight after just one session; for £20. Be skeptical about anyone who offers guaranteed weight loss, it all depends on the individual, and they can’t possibly promise success without even meeting you”.

CASE HISTORY 2

Sylvia, a 53-year old working mother, did have some success with hypnotherapy.

“I’d been fighting a weight problem ever since the birth of my second child. After four months of hypnotherapy, my weight fell from 10st 10lb to 9st. The stress of my job was causing me to overeat. Whenever I was under pressure, I picked at sweet, sugary snacks, and I gained more and more pounds.

I was very determined to control this problem, and I suppose I met the therapist half way. Hypnosis released my tension and stress, and I consequently felt that I didn’t need to keep nibbling.

However, I did find that I tended to put on weight after I finished the course of therapy. It was only when I started having hypnosis again that I lost weight once more”.

CASE HISTORY 3

Other slimmers have found that their weight has remained stable under hypnosis, and they need no further treatment.

Karen, a 29-year-old freelance make-up artists, lost a stone and a half through hypnosis, and her weight has remained stable in the six months since her successful treatment ended.

“I realized that I had an eating problem and decided to try hypnotherapy to help me overcome it. I found the hypnosis incredibly relaxing, and I just felt amazing afterwards”, she said.

“I had spent my entire life feeling guilty about eating anything, but gradually I felt it was alright to eat provided I was hungry. Because I am now eating sensibly for the first time in my life, I don't need therapy anymore, although I do have a tape I sometimes listen to”.