The Treatment of Conjunctivitis by Acupuncture

Abstract
Acupuncture can be very helpful in the treatment of both acute and chronic conjunctivitis. In an acute attack, the itching and discomfort can often be reduced in just one treatment. In chronic conditions where the problem is more long-standing, the condition can often be cured over the course of some 20 treatments. This article discusses the aetiology, presentation and treatment by acupuncture of acute and chronic conjunctivitis as well as of seasonal allergic rhinitis.

Introduction
Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the conjunctiva of the eye. The general symptoms of conjunctivitis include:
• pinkish, reddish, or sometimes blood-shot eye/s, which results from inflammation of the blood vessels of the conjunctiva
• grittiness and soreness of the eye
• possibly discharge of pus
• the eyelids may be ‘gummed’ together after sleep
• oversensitivity to light

The severity of the problem varies from a single mildly itching eye to both eyes being red and painful. In addition, the problem can range from an occasional acute attack to a chronic condition that has lasted for months or years.

Acute conjunctivitis is a sudden inflammation of the conjunctiva of the eye. Chronic conjunctivitis is a chronic inflammation of the conjunctiva with exacerbation of the symptoms and periods of remission that last for months or years. The causes are said to be the same as for acute conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis is also a symptom of hay fever, but the nature of the allergy in hay fever and the regularity of its timing set it apart from straightforward conjunctivitis.

Acupuncture can be very helpful in the treatment of both acute and chronic conjunctivitis. In an acute attack, the itching and discomfort can often be reduced in just one treatment. In chronic conditions where the problem is more long-standing, the condition can often be cured over the course of some 20 treatments.

Acute conjunctivitis
Acute conjunctivitis is attributed to a viral or bacterial infection or as a result of an allergic reaction. The viral form is known as ‘pinkeye’, while the red, irritated eye is usually associated with a bacterial infection. Conjunctivitis caused by these two infectious agents is believed to be contagious, and good hygiene - for example, keeping the hands away from the eyes, washing the hands, washing sheets and pillowcases in hot water, and not sharing eye-related paraphernalia - is believed to be essential for controlling the spread of the disease. Conjunctivitis that results from an allergic reaction is believed not to be contagious. Common allergens include pollen, animal hair or dander, dust, chemicals and certain medications.

TCM approach
Aetiology and pathology
There are two common patterns of acute conjunctivitis: i. wind-heat and ii. uprising of heat and dampness.

Wind-heat
This is a straightforward invasion of wind-heat attacking the eyes, which can be caused by exposure to extremes of temperature, either hot or cold, especially if this is combined with exposure to wind. This combination is found among those who spend a large amount of time on bicycles. The eye problem can also be caused by an exterior disease, for example a viral infection. The invading wind disrupts the flow of qi and fluids. Signs and symptoms of this pattern include:
• red, sore, itchy eyes
• possibly watering eyes
• sudden onset
• signs of an attack of wind-heat
• possible fever
• possible thirst
• floating and rapid pulse
• tongue has thin coating and red tip

If wind predominates there will be an increase in watery secretions (lacrimation). If heat predominates redness and pain will be more pronounced.

Uprising of heat and dampness
In the pattern of uprising of heat and dampness, interior heat and dampness ascend to the eye, causing it to become red and painful, and to discharge sticky, yellow matter. The common causes of this pattern include:
• a diet rich in spicy, greasy foods
• a diet of poor-quality food, containing preservatives and colourings
• strong feelings of anger and aggression that lead to the restraint of Liver qi
• latent heat in the springtime

Signs and symptoms of this pattern include:
• red and painful eyes
• yellow, sticky discharge from the eyes
• possible yellow nasal discharge
• possible indigestion
• greasy and dirty looking tongue coating
• slippery and rapid pulse
• tongue body is red, especially at the sides

Note that this pattern is commonly seen in bacterial conjunctivitis. In addition, it often combines with the wind-heat pattern.

Treatment
Main Points
The following prescription is helpful in all acute attacks:
• Fengchi GB-20: Clears wind and heat and brightens the eyes.
• Hegu L.I.-4: Clears wind and brings qi to the eyes (via the channel).
• Guangming GB-37: Benefits the eyes and clears heat.

Other useful points include:
• Shangxing DU-23: Brings qi to the eyes.
• Zhongzhu SJ-3: Very good for mild attacks of conjunctivitis; does not interfere too much with the patient’s qi circulation.
• Erjian (M-HN-10): Clears pain and redness in the eyes.

Method: Use a reducing method at all the points.

Points according to pattern differentiation

Wind-heat pattern
Treatment principle: Clear the wind-heat and cool and nourish the eyes.
In addition to the main points:
• Lieque LU-7: Clears wind-heat.
• Waiguan SJ-5: Clears wind-heat.
• Taiyang M-HN-9: Clears wind-heat affecting the head.
• If there is very high fever, add Shangyang L.I.-1 to clear extreme heat.
• If the eyes are very red, add Daling P-7, empirical point for red eyes.
• If the fever, inflammation and pain are only mild, then just the following point may be enough: Zhongzhu SJ-3 to clear redness of the eyes.

Prognosis: Two or three treatments should be enough. The patient may break out into a sweat as the pathogenic factor is expelled.

Uprising of heat and dampness pattern
Treatment principle: Clear the heat and dampness from the eyes. As noted above, the points Fengchi GB-20, Hegu L.I.-4 and Guangming GB-37 should be used.
• If there is obvious dampness and discharge in the eye, add Yanglingquan GB-34 to clear phlegm-dampness from the Liver and Gallbladder.

Prognosis: The number of treatments that will be required depends on the cause, but one to three treatments should be enough to clear the eyes. However, treatment should continue long enough to resolve any underlying problem, and it will normally be necessary for the patient to change their diet. If there are signs of pus, for example, they should avoid eating eggs.

Western medical and acupuncture treatment
The conventional Western medical treatment depends on the cause. If the inflammation is due to a viral infection, the patient is told to simply wait until the condition runs its course - usually one to two weeks. If the inflammation is due to a bacterial invasion, antibiotic eye drops are usually given. The bacteria are considered to be very contagious, so the patient is normally kept isolated from other people. If the inflammation is believed to be the result of an allergic reaction, a short course of topical corticosteroids and antibiotics is usually prescribed.

I have treated many cases of acute conjunctivitis in children with remarkable success. I have not had the opportunity to treat the condition in adults but would imagine that the results would be comparable.

Welder’s eye
There is another pattern of acute conjunctivitis that is rarely seen by acupuncturists and is known colloquially as ‘welder’s eye’. This form of conjunctivitis is a result of the eye being exposed to intense ultraviolet radiation, such as would be experienced by an arc welder who was not using an eye shield. Symptoms include:
• intense pain in the eye, which persists for about three days and then usually subsides on its own
• extreme bloodshot eye
The treatment of this condition would be the same as for the wind-heat pattern given above.

Welder’s eye is mentioned in many of the Chinese acupuncture texts (under the heading ‘electric ophthalmia’). Acupuncture is apparently very effective in reducing the pain and inflammation of this condition. In *Abstracts of Clinical Experience with Acupuncture*, the following results are given for a single acupuncture treatment in 46 cases of welder’s eye: 37 were pain free after the treatment, and 9 had no relief. Even if the research methodology does not stand up to the criteria of modern science, the results claimed are nevertheless very striking.

**Chronic Conjunctivitis**

Chronic conjunctivitis is a chronic inflammation of the conjunctiva with exacerbations of the symptoms and periods of remission that last over months or years. Often the inflammation and pain are not as severe as in acute conjunctivitis, but the continuing discomfort can be depressing.

The chronic condition is often a result of a persistence of the acute condition. It is also thought that the condition is a result of chronic exposure to an irritant or is a secondary reaction to, say, blepharitis (irritation of the margin of the eyelid) and entropion (misalignment of the extremity of the eyelid with inward turning of the eyelashes). The irritant may be a consequence of overtreatment with medications, resulting in drug-induced sensitivity.

**TCM approach**

**Aetiology and pathology**

There are two commonly seen patterns:

- Liver and Gallbladder heat
- Liver and Kidney weakness

**Liver and Gallbladder heat**
The most common cause of Liver and Gallbladder heat is constrained emotions, particularly anger. Additional contributing factors include a diet that is rich in greasy, hot or spicy foods, alcohol and smoking. The heat and dampness enter the Liver and Gallbladder channels and rise up to the eyes. Signs and symptoms of this pattern include:

- eyes alternate between normal and being red, swollen, and painful
- red face
- possibly strong smelling, highly coloured, scanty urine, especially when the eyes are inflamed
- often worse when the patient is upset or angry
- wiry pulse
- red tongue

**Liver and Kidney weakness**

It is said that the symptoms of the weak pattern of chronic conjunctivitis appear because the qi in the eyes is weak, which opens the way for wind to enter the eyes and cause redness and itching. The weakness of qi in the eyes is usually a result of weakness in the Liver and Kidney organs themselves. This can happen in old age. It is also seen in patients who repress their anger, but instead of becoming more and more aggressive, they become more and more introverted. In some patients, especially the young, the pattern arises because the channels are blocked, for example, by a lingering pathogenic factor so that little qi reaches the eyes. Signs and symptoms of this pattern include:

- eyes are often causing problems
- eyes look dull and maybe watery
- patient is listless and without energy
- pulse is weak or thready, or maybe weak and soft

In both of these chronic patterns, the eyes and the area around the eyes have a dull appearance. It seems as though the eyes are sitting in a dull, grey pool.

**Treatment**

**Main points**
Points to bring qi to the eyes include:

- Jingming BL-1
- Fengchi GB-20
- Hegu L.I.-4

*Method:* The even method is used at all these points.

**Liver and Gallbladder Heat**

*Treatment principle:* Clear damp-heat from the Liver and Gallbladder.

In addition to the main points, add:

- Taiyang M-HN-9: Clears heat affecting the head.
- Xingjian LIV-2: Clears Liver heat and brightens the eyes.
- Taichong LIV-3: Clears Liver heat and brightens the eyes.
- Guangming GB-37: Brightens the eyes.

*Method:* The even method is used at the main points and a strong dispersing method at the other points.

*Advice:* The patient should be encouraged to avoid eating greasy, spicy foods and using too much alcohol, and to take plenty of exercise, preferably in the fresh air.

**Liver and Kidney Weakness**

*Treatment principle:* Tonify the Liver and Kidneys and firm the original (yuan) qi.

In addition to the main points, use the following since they are good for organ and channel weakness:

- Zusanli ST-36: Tonifies the original qi.
- Taichong LIV-3: Tonifies the Liver and Kidneys and brightens the eyes.
- Ganshu BL-18: Tonifies the Liver and Kidneys.
- Pishu BL-20: Tonifies the Spleen and Liver.
- Shenshu BL-23: Tonifies the Liver and Kidneys.
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Method: The reinforcing method is used at all the points. Moxibustion can be used at the back-shu points.

Prognosis: This varies, depending on the level of exhaustion of the patient. If the exhaustion is of recent origin, 20 treatments may be enough. In some cases, treatment may need to continue longer.

Western medical and acupuncture treatment

There is not much that Western medicine has to offer in the treatment of chronic conjunctivitis. Obviously, irritating factors are to be eliminated, including perhaps medications that the patient is taking. Some medical texts suggest the prophylactic stimulation of the meibomian glands under carefully controlled conditions. In addition, topical corticosteroids and antibiotic therapy are often prescribed.

I have treated a handful of cases with chronic conjunctivitis as the main presenting symptom, and many more where it was a secondary symptom. When it is the main symptom, it responds slowly but surely. In addition, there were no unforeseen setbacks. When it was a secondary symptom, some improvement was noted, but the patient did not usually continue treatment until that particular symptom had healed. Note that rest is essential, as is a good diet containing fresh organic foods.

Hay Fever

Hay fever is a seasonal irritation of the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, and occasionally the upper respiratory tract. In the long distant past, hay fever was a real fever that people got when they were making hay or were near others who were making hay. Over the years its meaning has changed, so that now it has come to mean allergic rhinitis. In some patients the problems arise at specific times of year, while in others they arise on exposure to specific allergens such as hay dust or particular pollens, for example, grass pollens or the pollen from rape flowers. Typical symptoms include:

- nasal congestion and irritation, with discharge
- sneezing
- red, watery eyes

Often, there is:

- difficulty concentrating
- thick mucous discharge
- headache
- photophobia
- irritable cough

The onset is seasonal and is usually identified with pollen of various sorts, with some people being more upset by grass pollens (summer type) and some more by pollens from flowers and trees (spring type). For some people the sheer joy of seeing an old-fashioned meadow full of flowers is replaced by the sheer misery of hay fever. And for some, the effect is so violent that they have to stay indoors for a few weeks. Others have adopted drastic solutions like wearing a sort of space suit when they are outside with a Perspex pollen-free dome around their head!

I have not found any clear descriptions of hay fever in the Chinese medicine literature beyond the standard ones describing conjunctivitis. Therefore, what follows is based on my own clinical experience. Inevitably, it is one-sided, being based on the hay fever patients who have visited the clinic.

TCM approach

The emphasis in TCM is on internal factors. Although hay fever appears at a certain time of year, it is related more to the season than to the pollens prevalent at that time. In fact, the time of onset - both the time of the year and the age in years when hay fever started - provides a pointer to the aetiology and pathology.

Time of year

The time of year, late spring to early summer, when many patients suffer from hay fever is marked by a change of season from cold to hot. The hottest days have not yet been reached, and the average temperature is still increasing. If the Liver’s function of ensuring the free flow of qi is at all faulty, then the body will not adapt quickly enough. As a result, the warmth that has been stored in winter will remain through the spring and manifest as heat, a phenomenon known as ‘latent heat.’

Time of life

Hay fever is rare before the age of five, and this provides a further clue. This is the age when the emotions start to become controllable. It is also the age when stagnation of Liver qi first appears. Before this age, there is little in the way of restraint of emotions, and so the incidence of hay fever is very low.

Aetiology and pathology

The particles of pollen or other allergen are the external trigger for an attack. The internal factor is stagnation of qi in the eyes and nose, which can be a result of any of the following patterns:

- Liver yang rising
- Liver and Gallbladder damp-heat
- lingering pathogenic factor
- Lung and Spleen qi deficiency
- Lung and Kidney deficiency

Thus, the local stagnation of qi may be due to fire rising up, as in Liver yang rising, local stagnation, as in a lingering pathogenic factor, or insufficient qi overall, as in the remaining patterns.

There is yet another underlying cause not mentioned in either the Western or Chinese texts, and that is the effects of mercury leaching from dental fillings. As the mercury slowly diffuses upwards, it can severely affect the eye, exacerbating each of the listed patterns by causing local stagnation and irritation.
Liver yang rising
Restraint of the ‘seven emotions’ for any length of time impairs the Liver’s function of ensuring the free flow of qi, resulting in qi stagnation. Over a period of time, the stagnation transforms to heat and leads to Liver yang rising, which ascends to the eyes and nose and causes local heat and stagnation. Signs and symptoms include:
• red and/or watering eyes and other symptoms of hay fever
• frequently flying into a rage
• face colour may be red or white but becomes purple when enraged
• wiry pulse
• purple tongue

Liver and Gallbladder damp-heat
Damp-heat may accumulate due to a variety of causes, such as the overconsumption of spicy foods, excess sugary foods, meat or alcohol, or an intolerance to gluten. Sometimes it is a result of a combination of restrained emotions and a damp climate, as we experience in England. Once the damp-heat has accumulated, it can rise up to the eyes and nose and cause the irritation characteristic of hay fever. Signs and symptoms include:
• red and/or watering eyes and other symptoms of hay fever
• yellow-green nasal discharge
• irritability
• dull gray face, somewhat puffy, or dusky red face
• slippery and rapid pulse
• tongue coating is yellow and slimy, tongue body tends to be red

Lingering pathogenic factor
A lingering pathogenic factor is the remains of an illness that the patient had earlier. Often this pattern is caused by the remains of an old Lung infection. The infection is never completely thrown out, leaving behind the traces of illness that affect the Lung system. This manifests as irritation of the mucous membranes, which is characteristic of a subacute inflammation. Typical of this pattern is the presence of very thick phlegm; sometimes it is so thick that it is not apparent at first. Signs and symptoms include:
• red and/or watering eyes and other symptoms of hay fever
• often a gentle demeanor
• possible dry cough from time to time
• slightly glazed look in the eyes
• greasy skin
• grey or sometimes red face
• pulse may be slippery or weaker

Lung and Spleen qi deficiency
In the past this pattern commonly arose from overwork or from a long illness. Now it often arises early in childhood as a result of a variety of causes, including a difficult birth, irregular feeding during childhood, or overimmunisation. Once the pattern has taken hold it may remain with the patient for life. If the qi is weak, then once stagnation has arisen in the Lung system, for example, from a cold in the nose, there is not enough qi for the body to recover completely. Signs and symptoms include:
• red and/or watering eyes and other symptoms of hay fever
• droopy, cannot stand up straight
• probably poor appetite
• white face
• weak pulse
• pale tongue body

Lung and Kidney deficiency
The term ‘deficiency’ rather than ‘yin deficiency’ is given for this pattern because the modern presentation is a combination of yin and yang deficiency. The pattern often starts early in life, mainly as Lung and Spleen qi deficiency, at which point a combination of overwork and insufficient sleep can lead to Kidney weakness. If there is the slightest amount of heat in the system, this may rise up to the eyes and nose, presenting with local inflammation and irritation. If the patient does a lot of physical work, there may be the classic signs of yin deficiency with malar flush and night sweats. However, it is more common to find that the patient has become overtired from mental work, in which case these characteristic signs may be absent. Signs and symptoms include:
• red and/or watering eyes and other symptoms of hay fever
• thin body
• dark pools around the eyes
• weak back
• stays up late and is overstimulated and overworked
• very pale, possibly with red cheeks
• rapid pulse

Treatment
Main points
The following prescription is good for all types of hay fever. These points are particularly effective during an acute attack when they should be strongly dispersed:
• Lieque LU-7: Tonifies the Lungs, clears phlegm and opens the nose.
• Hegu L.I.-4: Benefits the nose, eyes and face.
• Yingxiang L.I.-20: Local point for the nose, tonifies the Lungs and brings qi to the eyes.

Note: There are two other commonly used points:
• Xuanzhong GB-39: Benefits the nose and eyes and descends Liver yang.
• Taichong LIV-3: Regulates the Liver.

These points are helpful during the season when the main thrust of treatment is to relieve the symptoms.
When treating in advance of the season, more emphasis should be given to treating the underlying pattern.

Liver yang rising
Treatment principle: Clear heat in the eyes and subdue Liver yang.
In addition to the main points, add:
• Xingjian LIV-2: Descends Liver yang.
• Taichong LIV-3: Descends Liver yang.
• Hegu L.I.-4: This main point is particularly indicated in this pattern because in addition to benefiting the nose and eyes, it descends Liver yang, especially in combination with Taichong LIV-3.
Method: The strong dispersion technique is used at the points.
Results: These points can have a very calming effect on the patient. In some cases the ensuing calm allows the patients to examine their lives and to take the necessary steps to avoid becoming as stressed again. In other cases, regular maintenance treatments are beneficial.

Lingering pathogenic factor
Treatment principle: Clear the eyes and eliminate the lingering pathogenic factor.
In addition to the main points, add:
• Bailao M-HN-30: Loosens thick phlegm.
• Ganshu BL-18: Loosens thick phlegm and eases the free flow of Liver qi.
• Pishu BL-20: Loosens and resolves phlegm.
• Fenglong ST-40: Resolves phlegm.
Method: The even technique is used at all the points.
Results: If these points are used outside the hay fever season, there is the possibility of eliminating the lingering pathogenic factor, but it will take time. An early sign that the treatments are working is that the dry nose will become wetter, with discharge of thick phlegm.

Liver and Gallbladder damp-heat
Treatment principle: Clear the eyes and eliminate Liver and Gallbladder damp-heat.
In addition to the main points, add:
• Zhangmen LIV-13: Resolves Liver and Gallbladder damp-heat.
• Zhongwan REN-12: Moves the qi and benefits the Spleen to resolve dampness.
• Yanglingquan GB-34: Resolves Liver and Gallbladder damp-heat.
• Xuanzhong GB-39: Benefits the eyes and nose and descends Liver yang.
Method: The even or dispersing method is used at all the points.
Results: The symptoms can easily be relieved during the season if treatment is given once a week. Although this is basically a condition of excess, it can be surprisingly difficult to eliminate the pattern altogether and provide a complete cure.

Lung and Spleen qi deficiency
Treatment principle: Bring qi to the eyes and tonify the Lung and Spleen.
In addition to the main points, add:
• Zusanli ST-36: Tonifies the Spleen.
• Sanyinjiao SP-6: Tonifies the Spleen.
Method: The reinforcing method is used at all the points.
Results: The time it takes to cure this condition depends on the patient’s level of deficiency. If they are very deficient and the problem has been there a long time, it will take many treatments. If the deficiency is not so significant and the organs are only mildly affected, the problem may be cured in one or two seasons. In the meantime, the symptoms of hay fever can be controlled during the season if treatment is given once a week.

Lung and Kidney deficiency
Treatment principle: Bring qi to the eyes and tonify the Lungs and Kidneys.
In addition to the main points, add:
• Shenshu BL-23: Strengthens the Kidneys.
• Taixi KID-3: Tonifies the Kidneys as well as the Kidney yin.
Method: The reinforcing method is used at all the points.
Results: By its very nature, this pattern is deep and of long duration. Therefore, it is likely to require many treatments and a long time to cure. However, the symptoms of red eyes during the hay fever season can be controlled by acupuncture.

Western medical and acupuncture treatment
In Western medicine, hay fever is seen as an allergic histamine response to foreign bodies that attack the conjunctiva and the lining of the nasal cavity. The emphasis is on the external attacking agent, identifying the pollen as an outside invading force. The treatment is of two types: desensitisation treatments and antihistamine-based treatments. They both have some drawbacks. The desensitising treatment is quite variable in its results and can occasionally lead to anaphylactic shock. The antihistamine-based treatment may make the patient feel drowsy.

Acupuncture usually provides excellent relief of symptoms during an attack, and if treatment is given before the pollen-producing season, there is even better success. The best time to treat these patients is...
four to six weeks before the hay fever season, which is in the middle of spring and is the ideal time to treat all Liver-related diseases. Two or three treatments at this time can make a huge difference in the severity of the symptoms later on.

That being said, curing the underlying pattern so that the symptoms never return is not so easy. Some patients respond very well, and treating these individuals over two or three seasons is enough to cure the problem once and for all. In other patients, there are difficulties. These arise because they may need to make significant internal changes, and the magnitude of these changes may seem to them to be out of proportion to the severity of the symptoms. For example, if the underlying cause is a difficult relationship with the patient’s spouse, the internal and external changes needed may be very large. Subconsciously, the person feels that it is better to muddle along and suffer some minor symptoms rather than go through the upheavals that may arise when deep changes are made to the structure of the marriage.

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This is an edited version of the chapter on Conjunctivitis in Acupuncture for the Eyes by Julian Scott, recently published by Eastland Press.

**Endnotes**

1. The equivalent pattern for babies and toddlers is slightly different and belongs to a special category in Chinese medicine: Liver malnutrition rising to the eyes. In Western children it is rare to see malnutrition. However, it is common to see the precursor to this, the ‘accumulation disorder,’ which is near to the adult pattern of retention of food and is described in more detail in Acupuncture in the Treatment of Children, Third Edition, Scott, J. and Barlow, T. Seattle: Eastland Press, 1999. p. 26.

2. In a significant number of cases the inflammation is a result of a herpes simplex viral infection. In such cases, the condition will not go away easily. A test can confirm the presence of the virus, but at present there is no effective treatment for the viral infection. The test will merely put a name on the persistent infection.


5. This pattern is often seen in red-heads and in the smouldering heat of adolescence.

6. There is a ‘mismatch’ here. The pulse is often weak even though the patient does not show the signs and symptoms of qi deficiency.