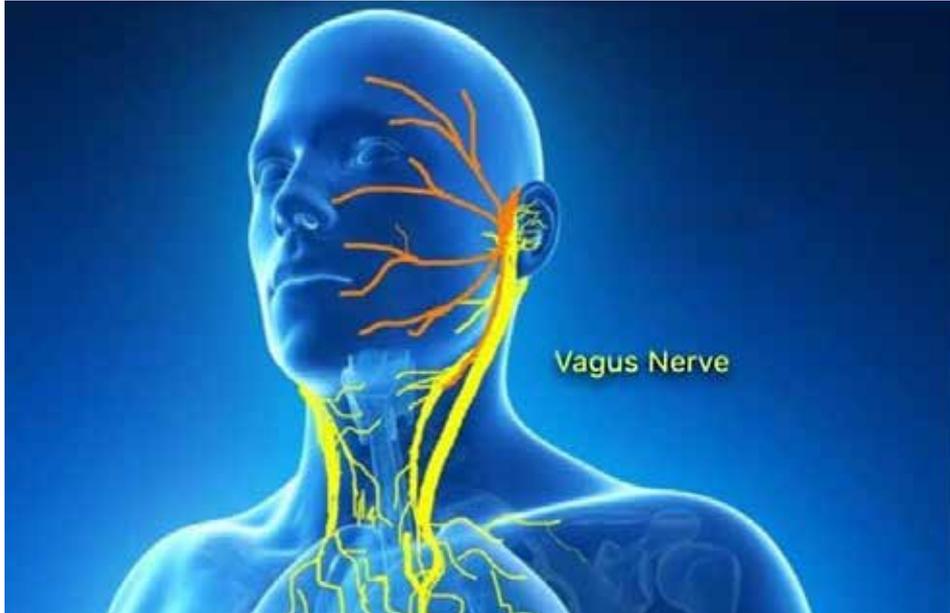


Chinese Medicine and the Vagus Nerve

by Shoshanna Katzman



The two main components of our nervous system are the sympathetic (fight or flight) corresponding to Yang energy and the parasympathetic (rest & digest) corresponding to Yin energy in Chinese medicine. As a major aspect of the parasympathetic nervous system, the vagus nerve provides a pathway connecting the brain to the body. It originates in the brain and moves throughout the neck and torso regulating digestion, breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, immunity and mood.

The vagus nerve allows neurochemical information to travel from the brain to the organs. This includes feel-good endorphins that help one cope with pain or stress. This key nerve is also involved in establishing a bi-directional connection between the brain and the gastrointestinal tract commonly known as the “brain-gut axis.”

Increasing vagal tone has been found to increase overall well-being through improving sleep and regulating the stress response. In fact, treatment of the vagus nerve is showing promise as a method for helping those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders, inflammatory bowel disease along with mood and anxiety disorders. It basically helps the body return to a state of balance, increases emotional stability and is especially helpful in promoting resiliency.

Major medical institutions like The Mayo Clinic and John Hopkin are promoting vagus nerve stimulation for self-care. In addition, pharmaceutical companies have developed handheld devices to increase vagal tone through application of electrical current to the skin.

Acupuncture is highly effective for increasing vagal tone and balancing the nervous system, thereby reducing pain and inflammation along with improving sleep and digestive function. One study shows that acupuncture stimulates the vagus nerve through transmitting signals into the vagus nerve and mediating an anti-inflammatory response in the spleen which governs transformation and transportation of food in Chinese medicine. An acupuncturist would typically insert an acupuncture needle into the vagus nerve point on

the ear in combination with other auricular points such as “shenmen” to calm the heart and spirit and the sympathetic autonomic point to balance the nervous system. An evaluation of the Five Elements is also used to determine which needs balancing to bring a person’s energetic system into homeostasis. For example, an imbalance of the metal element (lung and large intestine) might present itself as shallow or rapid breathing along with feelings of sadness and grief. On the other hand, a person with a wood (liver and gall bladder) imbalance would describe the tendency to shut down in the face of extreme stress, trauma or anxiety, present with unresolved anger, rigid thoughts and lack of initiative and flexibility.

Vagal tone can be positively influenced by breathing and meditation explaining why disciplines such as taiji, qigong and yoga are effective exercise method with this goal in mind. Sound-based vagus nerve stimulation has also been found to positively affects vagal tone. This is achieved through simple methods such as humming or singing. The qigong form known as the “Five Healing Sounds” is particularly effective for this purpose. Toning of the vagus nerves is also achieved through self-touch such as tapping techniques and gentle exercises of the upper body that combine eye-tracking.

Speak to your physician, psychotherapist, acupuncturist or massage therapist to see if they can direct you toward the best method. You just may find a way to bring greater resilience, less pain and greater happiness into your life.

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