

Efficacy of plum blossom acupuncture on alopecia areata – A case report

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ABSTRACT

Alopecia areata (AA) is a complex autoimmune condition that causes non-scarring hair loss and may present at any age. It typically presents with sharply demarcated round patches of hair loss. AA presents heterogeneously and is influenced by both environmental and genetic factors. There is no effective pharmacological treatment currently available for this disorder so far. We had an opportunity to treat a patient with AA using acupuncture. The patient was a 23-year-old male who presented to us with a complaint of sudden hair loss in patches in two demarcated round areas in a diameter of 2–3 cm on the back of the head for the past year. He was diagnosed as AA by AA progression index. After a long treatment course of about 3 months with acupuncture, this patient showed significant hair growth.

Key words: Alopecia areata, Chinese medicine, Plum blossom acupuncture

Alopecia areata (AA) is a type of alopecia characterized by no scarring hair loss. The condition is found in 0.1–0.2% of the general population [1-3]. The cause of AA appears to be related to the disturbance of autoimmune functioning, physical stress, genetic factors, and microcirculation [1,2]. AA could cause significant psychological problems resulting in reduced self-esteem that negatively affect the quality of life [1,2].

Acupuncture is one of the most frequently used forms of complementary medicine which involves the insertion of needles into the skin and underlying tissues for a therapeutic purpose [4]. Acupuncture points (body, ear, head, or tongue) could be stimulated with several types of acupuncture needles, electricity, laser, pressure, or heat. The procedure is frequently used in dermatology for treating a number of skin disorders [5,6]. The most frequently used acupuncture technique is plum blossom acupuncture, in which the skin should appear flushed, with bleeding. Plum blossom needle acupuncture is an important treatment method in traditional Chinese medicine that has the effect of promoting and solidifying the Qi to a particular area which helps in hair growth [7,8].


CASE REPORT

A 23-year-old unmarried male came to our Government yoga and naturopathy medical college and hospital with the complaint of sudden hair loss in patches of two demarcated round areas in a

diameter of 2–3 cm for the past year. There was no family history of alopecia. No history of any endocrinal disorder or infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, liver cirrhosis, or any medication was present.

On examination, there was no inflammation or atrophy at the site. The follicular orifice was invisible (Fig. 1a). As the patient was a software professional, the cause may be psychosomatic and a final diagnosis of AA by AA Progression Index (AAPI) was given.

After the AAPI score of 77.64%, the treatment of the patient was started. He was given body acupuncture points such as Shenshu (BL 23), Ganshu (BL 18), Taixi (KI 3), Sanyinjiao (SP 6), Xuehai (SP 10), Geshu (BL 17), Zusanli (ST 36), Fengchi (GB 20), Baihui (GV 20), Shang xing (GV 23), and Shuaigu (GB 8). After routine disinfection in the local area, stainless steel filiform needles of 0.5 tsun in diameter were inserted. After the needling sensation arrived, the needles were manipulated by twisting technique forth and back by the cushion of the thumb and the index finger, with the thumb forward and index finger backward for tonification. The needles were retained for 30 min and manipulated once every 10 min. The treatment was given on regular basis for about 28 days. After this first course, a gap of 1 week was given. Then the second course was given by pricking the alopecia site with the disinfected plum blossom needle by the medical practitioner with the strength of the wrist. The skin was slightly red during the time of treatment. This course was given on an alternate basis for about 48 days (Fig. 1b).

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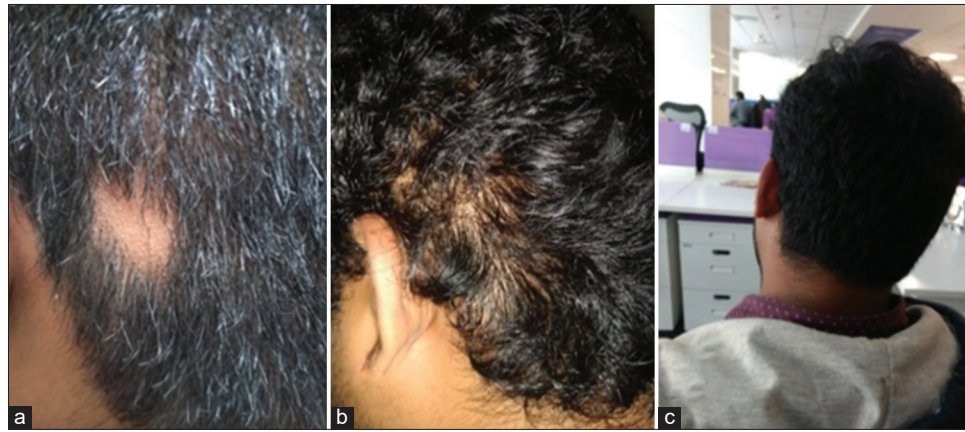


Figure 1: Picture of the patient (a) before treatment; (b) on 45th day (mid-treatment); (c) post-treatment

Table 1: Pre- and post-AAPI score

Area	Pre data		Post data	
	Score of % of alopecia areata in each location (%AA)	Score of hair loss(hair pull test)	Score of % of alopecia areata in each location (%AA)	Score of hair loss (hair pull test)
Left side	44	2	13	1
Right side	10	1	0	0
Top	30	2	0	0
Back	60	4	9	1
Total score	77.64		4.5	

AAPI: Alopecia areata progression index

A massive change in new hair growth with dense distribution and normal color was observed. After the 3 months of intervention, the score of AAPI came down to 4.5% which shows a positive progression. The pre- and post-AAPI scores are shown in Table 1. Furthermore, the hair-pulling test was negative after intervention (Fig. 1c).

DISCUSSION

In Chinese medicine, it is believed that “hair is the extension of blood” and “the brain is a sea of marrow”, and insufficiency of qi and blood, depletion of the kidney essence, and malnutrition of the marrow can cause lack of moistening and nourishment in hair leading to AA. Therefore, the intervention is mostly supposed to regulate and reinforce qi and blood, replenish the kidney essence, nourish blood, and grow hair clinically. Because the kidney stores essence, it dominates the bone and produces marrow with its manifestation in hair. The liver stores blood and the hair is the surplus of blood. Moreover, both essence and blood assist each other, and when the essence is sufficient, blood would be vigorous and the hair would also be flourishing and moist. Therefore, the vitality of the hair is rooted in the kidney and nourished by blood. Hence, deficiency of the kidney essence and production of wind by blood deficiency is the causative reason for alopecia. Therefore, the therapeutic principle in the treatment is designed to reinforce the yin of the liver and kidney, benefit essence, refill marrow, replenish and activate blood, assisted by nourishing blood, and soothing the liver [4,5].

Ganshu (BL 18) and Shenshu (BL 23), Back-Shu points, with reinforcing and benefiting effect, give the effects to nourish yin, replenish blood and tonify the kidney in combination with Taixi (LR 3). Geshu (BL 17), the influential point of blood can be used to regulate blood in combination with Xuehai (SP 10). Sanyinjiao (SP 6) is an intersecting point (BL 23). Baihui (GV 20), Shangxing (GV 23), and Shuaigu (GB 8) are able to spread and guide yang qi and eliminate blood stasis. Zusanli (ST 36) is supposed to strengthen the digestive and absorbing functions of the spleen and stomach, so as to increase the production of qi and blood and restore qi and blood for nourishing and growing the hair. Fengchi (GB 20) is supposed to expel wind and dredge the collaterals [7]. At the same time, pricking using a plum-blossom needle can dredge the local qi and blood and promote the growth of new hair, as it is described in modern medicine that it can excite and regulate the functions of the superficial nerves, flourish local blood circulation, regulate the endocrine and nervous system and enhance the immune ability of the body, for realizing the purpose to treat the disease and also cause local scalp congestion for promoting the growth of the hair follicle cells and the reproduction of the hair roots [9,10].

In the present case report, the AAPI score indicates a significant result. After the treatment for about 3 months, a reduction in the AAPI score to 4.5% was observed and the hair pull also was negative. This indicates that plum blossom is an effective treatment for AA.

CONCLUSION

In the present case report, there was a progression in hair growth on the affected area which implies that acupuncture intervention has a positive effect on AA. There is a need to carry out large-scale studies and follow-up.

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