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Pain, Mobility & Recovery

A practical guide to back, neck, knee and headache concerns

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This guide is designed to be read, saved and shared. It uses practical language, keeps TCM terminology in context and clearly separates general education from symptoms that need medical assessment.

Before you begin

Pain is not one problem. Location, injury history, movement, sleep, stress and neurological symptoms all change what may be appropriate. This guide combines practical observation with TCM-informed care, acupuncture and Tuina while keeping clear limits around symptoms that need conventional medical assessment.

What this book is designed to do

A practical reading approach

- Explain the topic in plain language without turning TCM terminology into a biomedical diagnosis.
- Help you notice useful patterns: timing, triggers, medicines, habits, associated symptoms and change over time.
- Show where everyday self-care may be reasonable and where medical review should come first.
- Make consultation more useful by helping you arrive with clearer information and questions.

A safety note

Emergency or red-flag symptoms come before complementary care. Tell healthcare professionals about prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, herbs, supplements, pregnancy, allergies and important chronic conditions.

CHAPTER 01

Understanding Lower Back Pain in TCM: Start With the Basics



Lower back pain is common and has many causes. Learn what a TCM consultation may explore and which warning signs need prompt conventional assessment.

Key points

- Back pain is a symptom, not one single condition.
- A TCM consultation should still ask about injury, weakness, numbness, bladder or bowel changes and medical history.
- Sudden neurological symptoms need urgent medical care.

Back pain has many possible causes

Muscle strain, prolonged sitting, deconditioning, joint changes and disc-related problems are only some possibilities. Because different causes can feel similar, it is unhelpful to assume that every lower-back ache has the same TCM or biomedical explanation.

What a careful TCM visit may include

The practitioner may ask how the pain began, what movements aggravate it, whether it travels into the leg, whether there is numbness or weakness and how sleep, work and activity are affected. TCM examination may add traditional pattern observations, but basic safety questions should never be skipped.

Movement often matters

For many uncomplicated episodes, staying gently active is usually more useful than prolonged bed rest. The right level of movement depends on the person and the cause. If pain clearly worsens with activity or follows an injury, get assessed before pushing through.

Where acupuncture or Tuina may fit

Some people use acupuncture or Tuina as part of conservative pain management. A responsible practitioner should explain the proposed approach, expected sensations, treatment frequency and reasons to stop or refer for further medical assessment.

Red flags need prompt care

Seek urgent medical attention for new severe weakness, loss of bladder or bowel control, numbness around the groin or saddle area, major trauma, fever with severe back pain, or

rapidly worsening neurological symptoms. These are not situations to manage with routine massage or self-treatment.

Bring a useful pain story

Note when the pain began, whether there was an injury, where it travels, what movements change it, and whether there is weakness, numbness, swelling, fever or night pain. Ask what the proposed treatment is trying to change, what movement is safe, what would count as worsening, and which symptoms mean you should stop complementary care and seek medical assessment.

Observe function, not just a pain number

A pain score can change from hour to hour, so also track function: Can you turn your head, climb stairs, sit through a meeting, sleep or carry groceries more comfortably? Note whether symptoms spread or neurological changes appear. Functional goals make it easier to judge whether an approach is helping and reduce the temptation to continue treatment simply because the pain number occasionally fluctuates.

CHAPTER 02

Neck and Shoulder Tension From Desk Work: A Sensible TCM Approach

Desk-related neck and shoulder discomfort is common. Learn how posture, breaks, exercise and TCM treatment can be combined realistically.

Key points

- Changing position regularly is usually more useful than chasing a “perfect posture”.
- Treatment should not replace movement, strengthening and ergonomic changes.
- Arm weakness, severe headache after injury or neurological symptoms need medical assessment.

Why desk work can feel so tiring

Long periods in one position can fatigue muscles around the neck, shoulders and upper back. Screen height, laptop use, stress, sleep and physical conditioning all influence how much discomfort a person feels.

Do not obsess over one perfect posture

A good workstation matters, but no posture stays comfortable forever. Frequent small changes, standing briefly, moving the shoulders and looking away from the screen are often more realistic than trying to sit rigidly “correct” for eight hours.

How TCM treatment may be used

Tuina or acupuncture may be used for short-term symptom relief or as part of a broader plan. The treatment should be adapted if there is recent trauma, severe osteoporosis, anticoagulant use, neurological symptoms or other medical concerns.

What you can change between visits

Build movement into the workday, position frequently used items within easy reach and consider a separate keyboard or screen for prolonged laptop use. Strengthening and general exercise can help reduce recurrence more than relying on passive treatment alone.

When to see a doctor

Seek medical assessment for persistent arm weakness, numbness that is worsening, loss of coordination, severe headache after an injury, fever with severe neck stiffness or pain associated with major trauma.

Bring a useful pain story

Note when the pain began, whether there was an injury, where it travels, what movements change it, and whether there is weakness, numbness, swelling, fever or night pain. Ask what the proposed treatment is trying to change, what movement is safe, what would count as worsening, and which symptoms mean you should stop complementary care and seek medical assessment.

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CHAPTER 03

Knee Pain: Questions to Ask Before Starting TCM Treatment



Not all knee pain is the same. Use this checklist to discuss swelling, injury, locking, activity and treatment expectations before acupuncture or Tuina.

Key points

- Knee pain after an injury needs a different conversation from gradual aching.
- Swelling, locking, instability and inability to bear weight are important details.
- TCM treatment should have a clear goal and review point.

Describe how it started

Was there a twist, fall or impact, or did the ache build gradually? Does it hurt on stairs, after sitting, while squatting or during sport? These details often matter more than simply saying “my knee hurts”.

Mention swelling and mechanical symptoms

Tell the practitioner if the knee swells, gives way, locks, catches or cannot fully straighten. These features may suggest that further medical or physiotherapy assessment is appropriate before or alongside TCM care.

Ask what the treatment is trying to achieve

A useful plan should have a practical goal such as reducing pain enough to walk more comfortably or supporting rehabilitation. Ask how progress will be judged and how many sessions are reasonable before reconsidering the plan.

Keep strength and movement in the picture

For many knee problems, strength, mobility, body weight, training load and footwear may be relevant. Passive treatment alone rarely addresses every contributor. A combined plan is often more sensible than searching for one technique to “fix” the knee.

Seek prompt care after major injury

If you cannot bear weight, the knee looks deformed, swelling is rapid after injury, the joint is hot and very swollen with fever, or there is significant calf swelling or breathlessness, seek conventional medical care promptly.

Bring a useful pain story

Note when the pain began, whether there was an injury, where it travels, what movements change it, and whether there is weakness, numbness, swelling, fever or night pain. Ask what the proposed treatment is trying to change, what movement is safe, what would count as worsening, and which symptoms mean you should stop complementary care and seek medical assessment.

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CHAPTER 04

Headaches: A TCM-Informed Guide With Safety Red Flags First

A straightforward overview of preparation, common sensations, hygiene and when to tell your practitioner about medical conditions.

Key points

- A new, sudden or unusually severe headache needs careful assessment.
- Track location, duration, triggers, sleep, hydration, vision and other symptoms.
- TCM support should not delay urgent evaluation when neurological or systemic warning signs are present.

Describe the headache before naming it

“Headache” covers many experiences: pressure, throbbing, tightness, one-sided pain, pain behind the eyes or discomfort linked with the neck. Note when it started, how long it lasts, what makes it better or worse, and whether you also have nausea, visual changes, fever, injury or neurological symptoms.

Everyday contributors are worth checking

Poor sleep, dehydration, skipped meals, long screen sessions, stress, alcohol and prolonged neck tension can all be relevant. This does not mean they explain every headache, but they are useful details to bring to both a doctor and a TCM practitioner.

How a TCM consultation may differ

A TCM practitioner may ask about the headache together with sleep, digestion, stress, menstrual history where relevant and other whole-body observations. Traditional pattern terminology describes the TCM framework; it should not be treated as proof of a biomedical cause.

What support may involve

Depending on assessment and suitability, a practitioner may discuss acupuncture, Tuina or other TCM approaches. Any treatment plan should account for your medical history, medicines, pregnancy status and previous diagnoses. Do not stop prescribed medicines without discussing it with the prescriber.

Red flags come first

Seek urgent medical help for a sudden “worst ever” headache, headache after significant injury, new weakness or numbness, confusion, fainting, seizures, severe neck stiffness with fever, or other rapidly worsening symptoms. Call 995 in Singapore for emergencies.

Bring a useful pain story

Note when the pain began, whether there was an injury, where it travels, what movements change it, and whether there is weakness, numbness, swelling, fever or night pain. Ask what the proposed treatment is trying to change, what movement is safe, what would count as worsening, and which symptoms mean you should stop complementary care and seek medical assessment.

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CHAPTER 05

Tuina vs Massage: What Is the Difference?



Understand how Tuina is used within TCM, how sessions may differ from relaxation massage and what to discuss before treatment.

Tuina is part of TCM

Tuina uses manual techniques such as pressing, rolling, kneading and mobilisation within a TCM framework. The aim of a session is not necessarily relaxation; techniques are selected according to the practitioner's assessment.

Relaxation massage has a different purpose

General massage may primarily aim to relax muscles and reduce day-to-day tension. Tuina can overlap in some techniques, but its context, assessment and treatment intent are different.

Tell the practitioner about injuries and conditions

Mention recent surgery, fractures, severe osteoporosis, pregnancy, skin conditions, unexplained swelling, numbness or significant pain. Pressure should be adjusted to what is appropriate and tolerable.

Know when hands-on treatment is not the first step

Sudden severe pain, major trauma, weakness, loss of bladder or bowel control, fever with severe illness or other red-flag symptoms should receive prompt medical assessment.

The difference is purpose, not simply pressure

Relaxation massage is usually designed around comfort and general muscle relaxation. Tuina is a manual therapy within TCM, so the practitioner may select pressing, rolling, kneading, mobilisation or other techniques according to an assessment. A Tuina session may therefore feel more targeted, but "stronger" is not automatically "better".

Tell the practitioner about conditions that change what is safe

Recent fractures, acute injuries, significant swelling, severe osteoporosis, blood-thinning medicines, pregnancy, surgery, neurological symptoms and areas with reduced sensation all matter. If pain is sharp, spreading or associated with numbness or weakness, hands-on treatment may not be the right first step until the cause is properly assessed.

Aftercare should be simple

Temporary tenderness can occur after manual therapy, especially when an area was already sensitive. Gentle movement, normal hydration and avoiding aggressive self-massage

immediately afterwards may be reasonable. If symptoms become markedly worse, new weakness or numbness appears, or another concerning symptom develops, seek appropriate medical review.

Assessment should come before intensity

Before hands-on treatment, the practitioner should understand the main complaint, recent injuries, medical conditions and any symptoms that could suggest a problem needing medical assessment. A painful area is not automatically a place that should be pressed harder. Sometimes the safest decision is to avoid a technique, modify it or postpone manual treatment until the cause is clearer.

Tuina can use several kinds of manual technique

Depending on the practitioner and purpose, Tuina may involve pressing, rolling, kneading, rubbing, assisted movement or mobilisation. The treatment does not need to feel dramatic. Technique should match the person, the body area and the clinical goal. Older adults, people with fragile skin or bone, and those recovering from injury may need a gentler approach.

Pain during treatment is information, not a challenge

A mild stretching sensation or temporary tenderness can be acceptable, but sharp pain, electrical sensations, sudden numbness, dizziness or a feeling that something is wrong should be reported immediately. You do not earn a better outcome by tolerating unnecessarily painful treatment.

Manual therapy works best with functional goals

Instead of judging a session only by whether the area feels “looser” for an hour, consider useful function: can you turn your head more comfortably, walk farther, sleep better or perform daily tasks with less difficulty? If benefit is brief and repeatedly disappears, the broader plan may need to include exercise, medical assessment or another form of care.

Know when massage-like treatment is not the priority

Major trauma, suspected fracture, new weakness, loss of bladder or bowel control, severe swelling, fever with a painful joint, chest pain or other serious symptoms need appropriate medical care. Complementary manual therapy should not be used to postpone urgent diagnosis.

Preparation can be straightforward

Wear comfortable clothing and explain any area you do not want treated. Avoid arriving immediately after a very heavy meal or after alcohol. Bring relevant medical information when an injury or chronic condition is involved. If you are uncomfortable with a technique, position or level of pressure, say so; consent continues throughout a hands-on session.

Frequency should follow the problem, not a package

Some people may benefit from several sessions while others may need only occasional care or a different approach. Frequency should be linked to the condition, response and functional goals. A prepaid package is not a clinical reason by itself. If progress stalls, the plan should be reviewed rather than simply increasing pressure or extending treatment indefinitely.

CHAPTER 06

Acupuncture: What to Expect Before, During and After a Session

A straightforward overview of preparation, common sensations, hygiene and when to tell your practitioner about medical conditions.

Before acupuncture

Have a light meal unless you have been told otherwise, avoid arriving intoxicated and wear clothing that allows access to the treatment area. Tell the practitioner about pregnancy, blood thinners, bleeding disorders and implanted medical devices.

During the session

Needles should be sterile and single-use. People describe sensations differently: some notice pressure, heaviness, tingling or a dull ache. Sharp or intolerable pain should be reported immediately.

After the session

Some people feel relaxed or tired. Move slowly when getting up, drink normally and follow any individual instructions provided. Contact the clinic if you have an unexpected reaction that concerns you.

Safety first

Acupuncture is not a substitute for emergency care. New neurological symptoms, chest pain, breathing difficulty or severe worsening symptoms should be assessed urgently by conventional medical services.

A good session starts before the first needle

Eat normally unless you have been given specific instructions, arrive with enough time to settle, and avoid alcohol before treatment. Wear clothing that gives reasonable access to the area being discussed. Tell the practitioner if you are pregnant, take blood-thinning medicines, have a bleeding disorder, are prone to fainting, have implanted devices or have a condition that changes skin sensation.

What should feel normal - and what should not

People describe acupuncture sensations differently. A brief dull ache, heaviness, tingling or pressure may occur. What matters is communication: sharp, burning, electrical or intolerable pain should be reported immediately. The practitioner can adjust or remove a needle. You do not need to “endure” severe pain to make a treatment effective.

After the appointment

Some people feel relaxed or tired, while others feel little difference immediately. Get up slowly, hydrate normally and follow any individual instructions. Mild local tenderness can occur, but unexpected or concerning reactions should be discussed with the clinic. Acupuncture should complement, not delay, investigation of serious or rapidly worsening symptoms.

Sterile technique matters more than ceremony

Acupuncture needles used in modern clinical practice should be sterile and single-use. The practitioner should clean the relevant area where appropriate, use safe handling technique and dispose of sharps properly. You do not need to understand every infection-control detail, but it is reasonable to expect a clean clinical environment and to ask questions if something

makes you uncomfortable.

Point selection is individual, not a fixed recipe

Two people with similar pain can receive different point selections because the practitioner may consider location, movement, other symptoms and the TCM pattern being used. This does not mean every variation is automatically correct. You can still ask what the chosen points are intended to support and how the practitioner will decide whether the approach is helping.

More needles are not automatically better

A session may use only a few needles or more, depending on the treatment plan. Number of needles, stronger sensation and longer retention do not automatically mean a more effective session. The treatment should remain tolerable, and a good practitioner should adapt if you are anxious, sensitive, frail or prone to fainting.

Certain situations deserve extra discussion

Pregnancy, blood-thinning medicines, bleeding disorders, immune suppression, implanted electrical devices, severe skin problems, reduced sensation and a history of fainting can affect how acupuncture is planned. These factors do not always mean acupuncture is impossible, but they should be disclosed before treatment rather than discovered afterwards.

Know what would count as progress

For a recurring problem, decide what improvement means before starting a long course. It may be fewer pain days, easier movement, better sleep or improved function at work. If nothing meaningful changes after a reasonable review period, ask whether the diagnosis, treatment approach or overall plan should be reconsidered.

A course of care should not be open-ended by default

Some problems may justify several sessions, but the number should be linked to a review plan. Ask when the practitioner expects to reassess symptoms and function. If each visit automatically leads to another without any discussion of progress, the treatment plan is incomplete. A reasonable course should have a purpose, a review point and a clear reason for continuing.

Aftercare is usually simple

Most people can return to normal activity after acupuncture unless given individual advice. Mild local soreness or a small bruise can occur. Contact the clinic if something unexpected worries you, and seek medical care for severe or rapidly worsening symptoms. Avoid turning normal aftercare into a long list of unnecessary restrictions unless there is a specific clinical reason.

CHAPTER 07

Acupressure at Home: A Simple Safety Guide Before You Try It



A straightforward overview of preparation, common sensations, hygiene and when to tell your practitioner about medical conditions.

Key points

- Home acupressure should be gentle and should not cause sharp, severe or worsening pain.
- Avoid pressing injured, infected, swollen or otherwise concerning areas without appropriate advice.
- Pregnancy, serious illness or unexplained symptoms are reasons to ask a qualified professional before relying on self-treatment.

Keep the goal modest

Home acupressure is best treated as a comfort or relaxation practice, not a way to diagnose or cure disease. If a point feels pleasant or mildly tender, gentle pressure may be reasonable. If it causes sharp pain, numbness, dizziness or worsening symptoms, stop.

Do not press everything that hurts

Pain can signal injury or illness. Avoid pressing directly on broken skin, obvious infection, fresh injury, significant swelling, a suspected fracture, a lump you do not understand or an area where a doctor has told you to avoid pressure.

Technique can stay simple

Use clean hands, a comfortable position and light-to-moderate pressure. Breathe normally and keep sessions short. More pressure is not automatically better. If you are copying a point from a diagram, remember that body proportions vary and a picture cannot replace an in-person assessment.

Special situations deserve extra caution

Pregnancy, bleeding disorders, blood-thinning medicines, severe osteoporosis, recent surgery and significant medical conditions can change what is appropriate. Ask a qualified healthcare professional or registered TCM practitioner before using techniques that might affect a vulnerable area.

Know when self-care is not enough

Do not use acupressure to delay evaluation of chest pain, severe breathlessness, fainting, sudden weakness, significant injury, severe abdominal pain or rapidly worsening symptoms. For emergencies in Singapore, call 995.

Ask for plain-language explanations

If a TCM term is unfamiliar, ask what it means in everyday language and whether it corresponds to a biomedical diagnosis or is only a traditional pattern description. Also ask about expected benefits, uncertainty, safety, interactions with medicines and when conventional medical care should take priority. Clear explanations are part of good care.

Use the “what, why, how long” rule

For any proposed TCM approach, ask three questions: What exactly are we doing? Why is it being suggested for me? How long should we try it before reviewing whether it is worthwhile? Add a fourth question when medicines or medical conditions are involved: What safety or interaction issues should I know about? These questions make care easier to understand without requiring you to become an expert in TCM terminology.

CHAPTER 08

TCM and Conventional Medical Care: Using Both Responsibly

A safety-first guide to communication between healthcare providers and situations that require urgent conventional medical attention.

Tell each provider what you are using

Good communication reduces avoidable risks. Tell your TCM practitioner about your medical diagnoses, prescriptions and hospital care, and tell your doctor or pharmacist about herbs, supplements and TCM products.

Do not stop prescribed treatment on your own

If you are considering changing a prescription medicine, discuss it with the clinician who prescribed it. Stopping some medicines suddenly can be dangerous.

Keep records

A simple list of medicines, supplements, allergies and recent tests makes it easier for different providers to understand your care.

Recognise emergencies

TCM clinics are not emergency departments. For severe or sudden symptoms, difficulty breathing, major bleeding, stroke-like symptoms or loss of consciousness, call 995 or seek urgent conventional care.

You do not have to choose one side

Many people use TCM while also seeing a GP, specialist, physiotherapist or other healthcare professional. The safest approach is transparency. Tell each provider what medicines, herbs, supplements and treatments you are using. This allows interactions, duplicated treatment and conflicting advice to be considered rather than hidden.

Different systems answer different questions

A TCM pattern description and a biomedical diagnosis are not interchangeable. One may be used to organise treatment within the TCM framework, while the other may rely on

examination, imaging, laboratory tests or established diagnostic criteria. Keeping those roles clear reduces confusion and prevents traditional terminology from being mistaken for proof of organ disease.

Urgent care is not a competition

Chest pain, severe breathing difficulty, stroke-like symptoms, major trauma, uncontrolled bleeding, loss of consciousness and other emergencies need immediate conventional medical care. Complementary treatment can be reconsidered after urgent problems are stabilised. Responsible TCM should never require delaying emergency assessment.

Give both sides the same medication list

One of the simplest safety habits is to keep a current list of prescription medicines, non-prescription products, vitamins, supplements and Chinese medicines. Show the same list to your doctor and TCM practitioner when relevant. This reduces the chance that each provider is working with only half the information.

Test results do not lose importance because you use TCM

Blood tests, imaging and specialist diagnoses can answer questions that traditional pattern assessment cannot. If a doctor has identified diabetes, anaemia, a fracture, infection or another condition, do not replace that information with a TCM label. Traditional care may still be discussed as complementary support, but the established diagnosis remains important for safety and planning.

Chronic disease needs coordination, not secrecy

People with high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney or liver disease, cancer, heart disease and other chronic conditions may still be interested in TCM. The safest approach is coordinated disclosure. Some herbs, supplements or changes in diet may affect medicines or laboratory results, so your treating medical team should know what you are using.

Do not stop prescribed medicine because of a broad promise

Be cautious if anyone tells you to stop essential medicine immediately because a complementary treatment can “replace” it, especially without speaking to the prescriber. Changes to long-term medication often need monitoring and should be made with the healthcare professional responsible for that treatment.

The best integration is practical

Integrated care does not require both systems to agree on every theory. It requires each to stay within its strengths, communicate clearly and avoid delaying necessary care. A patient should be able to use TCM for appropriate goals while still receiving vaccinations, screening, emergency care, surgery, medicines or rehabilitation when those are needed.

Preventive care still matters

Using TCM does not remove the value of vaccination, cancer screening, blood pressure checks, diabetes monitoring, dental care or other preventive services appropriate for your age and risk. Complementary care works best when it sits beside, rather than replaces, routine prevention and evidence-based follow-up for known conditions.

Transitions are the moments to communicate again

Hospital discharge, surgery, a new specialist, pregnancy, a new diagnosis or a major medicine change are good times to update every practitioner involved. Information that was safe six months ago may no longer be enough. Repeating your current medicine and supplement list during these transitions can prevent avoidable misunderstandings.

Practical consultation checklist

- What is the main concern, and when did it start?
- What clearly makes it better or worse?
- Which medicines, supplements or herbs are you taking?
- Are there allergies, pregnancy considerations or chronic conditions that matter?
- Which symptoms are new, severe, persistent or changing quickly?
- What is the single most useful outcome you want from this consultation?
- What would mean conventional medical review or emergency care should come first?

Contact Shande

For appointments and general enquiries, use WhatsApp or WeChat. Email is not presented as a routine customer-service channel.

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References & further reading

The chapters in this guide are drawn from the Shande Health Library. Key safety points are linked back to the public-health or professional sources cited in those articles.

General health education | Not a diagnosis | Emergency in Singapore: 995