

Acupuncture Sensations: What to Expect During Treatment

Authored by
mohammed looti

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Introduction to Acupuncture Sensations

Acupuncture, an ancient therapeutic practice originating in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), involves the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body. While the mechanical action of needle insertion is simple, the resulting complex array of physical feelings experienced by the patient is central to the efficacy and theory of the practice. These sensations, collectively termed **Deqi** (pronounced "duh-chee"), represent a critical concept in acupuncture theory, signaling the effective stimulation of the underlying neurophysiological system and the engagement of the therapeutic process. The nature of these sensations varies significantly among individuals and across different treatment points, ranging from mild tingling or pressure to intense feelings of heaviness, soreness, or dull aching. Understanding the precise subjective and objective mechanisms underlying Deqi is essential not only for practitioners seeking optimal therapeutic outcomes but also for researchers attempting to bridge the gap between traditional theory and modern neurobiology. The experience of Deqi is often cited in TCM literature as a necessary precondition for successful treatment, suggesting that the quality and intensity of the sensation may correlate directly with clinical effectiveness, thus necessitating careful scientific investigation into its components.

The study of acupuncture sensations transcends simple pain perception; it delves into complex interactions between mechanical stimulation, peripheral nerve activation, central processing, and psychological expectation. Early Western investigations often dismissed these feelings as mere placebo effects or simple tissue injury responses. However, contemporary research utilizing advanced imaging techniques and quantitative sensory testing (QST) has demonstrated that Deqi involves distinct physiological pathways separate from standard pain signals, often activating specific brain regions associated with somatosensory processing and affective regulation. This distinction is crucial, as the therapeutic goal is typically to induce Deqi, which is described as being distinct from sharp, unbearable pain (the unwanted sensation known as "Buzhi"). Therefore, detailed characterization of the subjective experience--how the patient interprets and reports the sensation--is paramount for validating treatment protocols and standardizing practice across different cultural and clinical settings. The ambiguity inherent in describing subjective internal states necessitates structured assessment tools to quantify these ephemeral feelings accurately.

The Phenomenon of Deqi: Definition and Characteristics

The term **Deqi** translates literally as "arrival of Qi" or "obtaining the Qi," signifying the practitioner's successful manipulation of the needle to elicit a therapeutic response from the patient's intrinsic energetic system, as conceptualized in TCM. From a biomedical standpoint, Deqi is defined as the characteristic cluster of sensations felt locally at the needling site and often radiating along the associated meridian or nerve pathway. Classic descriptions categorize Deqi using four primary descriptors:

Suan (soreness or aching)

Ma (numbness or tingling, often likened to paresthesia)

Zhang (distension, fullness, or pressure)

Zhong (heaviness or weightiness)

These sensations are typically perceived as deep and dull rather than superficial and sharp, indicating engagement of deeper tissue structures, potentially involving fascia, muscle spindles, and deeper afferent nerve fibers. The intensity and quality of these components are highly variable, influenced by factors such as the technique used (e.g., depth, angle, manipulation), the specific acupuncture point chosen, and the patient's individual neurological sensitivity and emotional state. The ability to reliably elicit and measure this propagation is crucial for both clinical efficacy and scientific verification.

A critical characteristic distinguishing Deqi from simple mechanical irritation or pain is its propagation. While the initial insertion sensation is localized, true Deqi often involves a spreading or traveling feeling that extends outward from the point, sometimes tracing known meridian pathways or following the trajectory of major peripheral nerves. This phenomenon, known as **propagated sensation along channels (PSAC)**, has been a subject of intense research, although its exact physiological basis remains debated. Some theories link PSAC to fluid dynamics within the connective tissue matrix (fascia), while others hypothesize involvement of highly organized, complex neural reflexes or activation patterns within the central nervous system. Regardless of the exact mechanism, the presence of these propagating sensations is often viewed by TCM practitioners as an indicator of a powerful therapeutic response, suggesting that the localized stimulus is effectively modulating systemic physiological function.

Subjective Qualities of Deqi Sensations

To move beyond anecdotal evidence, researchers have utilized structured psychometric tools, such as the **Massachusetts General Hospital Acupuncture Sensation Scale (MASS)** or the **PCOR-Acupuncture Sensation Scale (PASS)**, to quantify the subjective experience of Deqi. These scales typically ask patients to rate the intensity of various sensations perceived during treatment. The most commonly reported subjective qualities include those classic four components (Suan, Ma, Zhang, Zhong), alongside other frequent descriptors such as warmth, coolness, throbbing, or electric shock-like feelings. Analyzing these subjective reports reveals that Deqi is not a monolithic experience; rather, it is a multimodal sensory event involving mechanoreception, nociception, and thermal perception. Furthermore, the affective component of the sensation is also highly relevant; while Deqi is intense, it is generally described as tolerable, often possessing a quality of "good pain" or productive discomfort, contrasting sharply with the negative valence associated with typical sharp pain.

The subjective interpretation of intensity is also highly modulated by cultural background and prior expectations. Patients familiar with acupuncture often report Deqi more readily and perceive the sensations as more therapeutic than novice patients, suggesting a significant cognitive overlay influencing sensory perception. For instance, the feeling of heaviness (Zhong) might be interpreted by one patient as a grounding, therapeutic sensation, while another might perceive it negatively as unpleasant pressure. This highlights the intrinsic difficulty in standardizing a subjective phenomenon across diverse populations. Researchers must meticulously differentiate between the true sensory input (the afferent signal) and the perceived, integrated experience (the output influenced by memory, expectation, and emotion). This differentiation is paramount when designing sham controls in clinical trials, ensuring that the control procedure does not inadvertently elicit a sub-threshold form of Deqi, thereby confounding the results.

Physiological Mechanisms Underlying Acupuncture Sensation

The physiological basis of Deqi initiation begins with the mechanical interaction between the acupuncture needle and the underlying tissues. When a needle is inserted and manipulated (e.g., twisting, lifting, thrusting), it mechanically deforms the tissue, engaging various sensory receptors. Primary targets include **A-delta and C afferent nerve fibers**, which transmit signals related to pressure, temperature, and dull pain, consistent with the characteristic aching (Suan) and heaviness (Zhong) reported. Crucially, research has shown that the connective tissue matrix, or fascia, plays a significant role. Manipulation of the needle causes the fascia to wrap around the needle shaft, leading to a phenomenon known as "needle grasp." This mechanical tension on the fascia stimulates mechanoreceptors embedded within the dense collagen network, generating sustained signals that are distinct from the momentary signals caused by superficial skin puncture.

Further physiological investigation suggests differential activation based on the specific type of sensation experienced. The tingling or numbness (Ma) component is often correlated with the activation of **A-beta fibers** and potentially small nerve fascicles, similar to the sensations experienced in mild paresthesia. Conversely, the deep, aching quality (Suan) is strongly linked to C-fiber activation. The sustained stimulation caused by continuous needle manipulation leads to temporal summation of these afferent signals, resulting in the characteristic deep, dull, and spreading feeling of Deqi. This sustained input travels up the spinal cord, activating specific nuclei in the thalamus and eventually engaging cortical areas responsible for somatosensory integration (S1 and S2), as well as limbic structures involved in emotional processing (e.g., the insula and anterior cingulate cortex). The unique blend of sensory input and central processing distinguishes the Deqi experience from simple acute pain.

The Role of Nociception and Afferent Pathways

While Deqi is intentionally sought as a therapeutic sensation, it undeniably involves a degree of

nociception--the sensory nervous system's response to actual or potential tissue damage. However, the key distinction lies in the intensity and the quality of the signal processing. Unlike damaging stimuli that trigger a purely protective, negative pain response, the controlled, focused stimulation of acupuncture appears to activate the body's intrinsic **descending inhibitory pain pathways (DIPPs)**. The initial afferent signal, carried by A-delta and C fibers, reaches the central nervous system, triggering the release of endogenous opioids (like endorphins and enkephalins) from the periaqueductal gray (PAG) and rostral ventromedial medulla (RVM). These neurotransmitters then descend to the spinal cord, modulating or inhibiting the transmission of subsequent pain signals, effectively turning the initial noxious input into a tolerable, therapeutic sensation.

This modulation explains why Deqi can be intense yet not unpleasant. The physiological response is a dynamic interplay: the peripheral stimulus generates a signal, and the central nervous system immediately begins to process and filter that signal through inhibitory mechanisms. The effectiveness of acupuncture, particularly in pain management, is often attributed to the robust activation of these DIPPs. Furthermore, the specific engagement of deeper afferent nerves through techniques targeting muscle and fascia--rather than just superficial skin receptors--is hypothesized to be critical for maximizing the central effects. Deep pressure and mechanical stretch, characteristic of effective needle manipulation, may preferentially recruit specific subsets of afferent fibers (e.g., Group III and IV muscle afferents) that have a potent ability to influence autonomic and central pain processing systems, thereby generating the complex and deep qualities of Deqi.

Psychological and Contextual Influences on Sensation

The perception and interpretation of acupuncture sensations are highly susceptible to psychological and contextual factors, operating under the umbrella of **expectancy and conditioning**. A patient's belief in the efficacy of the treatment, the therapeutic relationship with the practitioner, and the clinical environment significantly modulate the perceived intensity and affective valence of Deqi. If a practitioner explicitly instructs the patient to expect a strong, therapeutic aching sensation, the patient is more likely to interpret the resulting physiological input positively and report a higher intensity of Deqi, even if the objective stimulus remains constant. This cognitive top-down modulation demonstrates the intricate relationship between psychology and somatosensory experience, suggesting that Deqi is a psycho-physiological construct rather than a purely mechanical one.

The placebo effect, often intertwined with contextual factors, plays a substantial role in shaping the sensory experience. Studies utilizing "sham" acupuncture (e.g., non-penetrating needles or needling at non-acupuncture points) often report minor subjective sensations, indicating that even minimal, expected stimulation can trigger subjective reports of Deqi-like feelings. However, detailed

quantitative sensory testing and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies typically reveal distinct patterns of brain activation between true Deqi and sham stimulation, particularly in areas related to deep tissue processing and analgesic response. This suggests that while psychology influences the *interpretation* of the sensation, true Deqi involves unique physiological engagement that distinguishes it mechanistically from purely psychological effects. Optimizing the clinical context--through clear communication, empathetic interaction, and explanation of the expected sensations--can enhance the therapeutic benefit by positively framing the unavoidable intensity of Deqi.

Clinical Significance and Standardization of Deqi

The accurate elicitation and interpretation of Deqi hold profound clinical significance. In the framework of TCM, the presence of strong Deqi is often considered a prognostic indicator, suggesting that the "Qi" has been successfully mobilized and the treatment is likely to be effective. Conversely, the absence of Deqi, or the perception of only sharp, superficial pain, suggests an ineffective treatment session requiring technique modification. For pain conditions, studies consistently show a correlation between the reported intensity of Deqi (particularly the aching and pressure components) and the magnitude of the subsequent analgesic effect, reinforcing the traditional assertion that Deqi is necessary for therapeutic action. Therefore, practitioners are often trained to manipulate the needles until the patient reports the desired array of sensations, tailoring the stimulus intensity to the patient's tolerance and the specific clinical goal.

Standardization remains a major challenge in acupuncture research. Because Deqi is subjective and dependent on practitioner skill, researchers have developed detailed protocols to ensure consistent stimulation across different studies. This involves defining precise needle parameters (depth, frequency, amplitude of manipulation) and utilizing validated scales to measure the resulting sensation profiles. Efforts to standardize Deqi are essential for generating replicable scientific evidence that can confirm or refute the relationship between sensory input and clinical outcome. Furthermore, understanding which specific components of Deqi (e.g., numbness versus heaviness) correlate best with particular therapeutic endpoints (e.g., chronic pain versus anxiety) allows for refinement of needling techniques, moving the practice from an art based solely on intuition toward an evidence-based modality grounded in neurophysiology.

Measurement and Assessment Tools

The transition from qualitative, anecdotal descriptions of Deqi to quantitative, measurable data has been facilitated by the development of specialized assessment instruments. These tools are designed to capture the multi-dimensional nature of the experience. The most widely used scales employ a combination of intensity ratings and qualitative descriptors. For example, the **PCOR-Acupuncture Sensation Scale (PASS)** requires patients to rate the intensity (on a 0-10 scale) of

approximately 12 distinct sensations, including the four classic components (Suan, Ma, Zhang, Zhong) and others such as warmth, coolness, and itching. This granularity allows researchers to construct a precise "sensation profile" for specific acupuncture points or specific manipulation techniques, providing objective data that can be correlated with physiological measures (e.g., changes in blood flow, muscle activity, or fMRI data).

Beyond simple intensity ratings, advanced assessment often incorporates temporal characteristics. Patients are asked not only how intense the sensation is but also how quickly it develops, how long it persists, and whether it propagates. These temporal dynamics are crucial because they offer insights into the underlying fiber types being activated; rapid onset followed by quick decay suggests fast-conducting A-delta fibers, whereas slow onset and sustained persistence point toward C-fiber involvement and sustained tissue engagement. The robust application of these measurement tools is vital for advancing the scientific understanding of acupuncture, allowing researchers to move beyond the binary question of whether acupuncture works, toward the nuanced investigation of *how* it works and *which* specific sensory inputs drive particular therapeutic outcomes.