

The Application Progress of Traditional Chinese Medicine Nursing Appropriate Techniques in Patients with Insomnia

Xuling Li

Qinghai Red Cross Hospital, Xining 810000, Qinghai, China

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Abstract: This paper elaborates on the concept of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) nursing appropriate techniques, selects techniques including moxibustion, auricular seed pressing, acupoint application, massage and Tuina, Chinese herbal foot bath, five-tone therapy, and aromatherapy, and summarizes the application mechanisms, methods, and clinical effects of these techniques in patients with insomnia. It also analyzes the existing problems in their application and discusses future development and practice directions, aiming to provide references for establishing more standardized and scientific nursing plans for patients with insomnia.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese medicine nursing; Insomnia; Bu mei (sleeplessness); Appropriate techniques; Review

Online publication: Mar 10, 2026

1. Introduction

Insomnia is a sleep disorder characterized by frequent and persistent difficulty in falling asleep and/or maintaining sleep, resulting in dissatisfaction with sleep quality ^[1]. With the development of social economy, sleep disorders have appeared in all age groups, becoming a common disease with an increasing incidence year by year. The 2024 China Resident Sleep Health White Paper released by the China Sleep Research Association shows that more than 60% of Chinese adults suffer from varying degrees of sleep disorders, especially in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, where the reported rate of insomnia is as high as 72% ^[2]. From the perspective of TCM, insomnia is called “bu de wo” (unable to lie down), “bu de mian” (unable to sleep), “mu bu ming” (eyes unable to close), or “bu mei” (sleeplessness). Its main manifestations include frequent sleep abnormalities: mild patients have symptoms of difficulty falling asleep and easy awakening; moderate patients often wake up intermittently and cannot fall asleep again after waking; severe insomnia patients may experience complete inability to sleep all night. According to TCM theory, insomnia in humans is mainly affected by two factors: physiology and psychology. Physiological causes include overwork, Yin deficiency with fire hyperactivity, liver Yang disturbance, and internal injury to the heart and spleen; psychological causes include heart and

gallbladder Qi deficiency, excessive thinking, and emotional disorders. Chronic insomnia can affect the operation of the nervous, cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems, and is prone to inducing mental illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, endocrine and metabolic diseases, and immune diseases. Currently, the treatment methods for insomnia include psychological therapy, physical therapy, and TCM therapy. TCM nursing appropriate techniques are safe, reliable, widely applicable, and easy to operate. Their application in the auxiliary treatment of insomnia patients is of great significance for improving the nursing level and life satisfaction of insomnia patients.

2. Concept of TCM appropriate techniques

TCM appropriate techniques, also known as traditional TCM therapies, refer to a TCM prevention and treatment intervention method that integrates TCM theory with modern science and technology, has been verified by clinical practice and expert demonstration, and is characterized by good compliance, high safety, simplicity, effectiveness, minimal side effects, and ease of operation. From the perspective of TCM theory, TCM appropriate techniques are mainly used to regulate poor Qi and blood circulation and Yin-Yang imbalance, help restore the normal functions of the Zang-fu organs, realize the circulation of the whole body's meridians, and achieve the balance of Yin and Yang in the human body^[3]. Whether for clinical treatment or home care, TCM nursing appropriate techniques have certain auxiliary therapeutic effects, which can alleviate diseases such as indigestion, insomnia, and headache, reduce patients' physical discomfort, and improve their quality of life.

3. Application of TCM nursing appropriate techniques in patients with insomnia

Targeting the core pathogenesis of insomnia—"Yin-Yang imbalance and heart spirit malnutrition"—TCM nursing appropriate techniques have formed various intervention systems. Among them, techniques such as moxibustion and auricular seed pressing are widely used in clinical practice with definite curative effects, all based on meridian and Zang-fu theories to regulate Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang for tranquilizing the mind and promoting sleep. The specific application progress is as follows:

3.1. Moxibustion

In terms of mechanism of action, based on the TCM theory of "Yang failing to enter Yin leading to insomnia", moxibustion uses warm stimulation of acupoints to tonify Yang, unblock Qi and blood, and regulate Yin and Yang, which is suitable for patients with Yang deficiency and insufficient Qi and blood. Modern studies have shown that it can regulate the autonomic nervous system, promote melatonin secretion, and adjust the biological clock. Key clinical application points are as follows:

(1) Acupoints

Baihui (GV20), Shenque (CV8), Yongquan (KI1), etc.;

(2) Operation

Including indirect moxibustion and mild moxibustion, with methods selected based on syndrome differentiation;

(3) Specifications

Perform 1–2 hours before bedtime, 3–5 times a week, 15–30 minutes each time, with adjustments according to the course of treatment. In terms of application effects, Yu Liqiang et al. found through a

systematic review that moxibustion is effective in improving sleep disorders in patients after stroke ^[4]. Wang Yanru used a random number table to divide 80 stroke patients into an observation group and a control group, selecting three acupoints: Shenmen (HT7), Zusanli (ST36), and Baihui (GV20), and implementing moxibustion treatment on the observation group ^[5]. The results showed that moxibustion significantly improved the patients' sleep quality and insomnia scores, with an effective rate of 95% in the observation group, which was better than conventional treatment. Li Jiaheng et al. used Note Express software to include 11 literatures involving 927 cases, and conducted Meta-analysis and quality evaluation using STATA17.0 and Review Manager 5.4.1 software ^[6]. They found that the curative effect of Baihui moxibustion on insomnia patients was 1.49 times higher than other methods, with no adverse reactions, safety, convenience, and low cost.

3.2. Auricular seed pressing

In terms of mechanism of action, based on the TCM theory of “the ear being the convergence of all meridians”, stimulating core auricular points such as Shenmen (TF4) and Subcortex (AT4) can unblock meridians, tranquilize the mind, and stabilize will. Modern studies have shown that it can balance cerebral excitation and inhibition and promote the secretion of inhibitory neurotransmitters. Key clinical application points are as follows:

(1) Materials

Select *Vaccaria* seeds or magnetic beads according to physical constitution;

(2) Process

Syndrome differentiation-based point selection—disinfection—application—pressing, 3–4 times a day, with enhanced pressing before bedtime;

(3) Adaptability

Add points based on syndrome differentiation, combined with sleep hygiene guidance. Different auricular seed pressing materials have certain differences in clinical efficacy, but all can improve the sleep quality of insomnia patients. Tu Qiuyue et al. found through Meta-analysis and evaluation that auricular point therapy has a significant effect in the clinical treatment of post-stroke insomnia patients ^[7]. Wang Zihao et al. selected 50 stroke patients with insomnia, choosing points such as Sympathetic (AH6a), Shenmen (TF4), Heart (CO15), Subcortex (AT4), and Endocrine (CO18), and performed auricular seed pressing treatment on the experimental group ^[8]. The results showed that patients receiving auricular seed pressing achieved better curative effects and were more likely to have good sleep.

3.3. Acupoint application

In terms of mechanism of action, drugs penetrate into meridians through acupoints to regulate Qi and blood, tranquilize the mind, nourish the spirit, regulate Zang-fu functions, and avoid gastrointestinal irritation caused by oral drugs. Modern studies have shown that it can regulate neurotransmitters and reduce cerebral cortical excitability. Key clinical application points are as follows:

(1) Compatibility

Select *Polygala tenuifolia*, *Bupleurum chinense*, *Angelica sinensis*, etc., based on syndrome differentiation;

(2) Acupoints

Shenque (CV8), Xinshu (BL15), Yongquan (KI1), etc.;

(3) Specifications

Apply before bedtime and remove in the morning, 3–4 times a week, using mild matrices for sensitive skin. Hou Xiao et al. selected 100 elderly patients with insomnia of heart-spleen deficiency type, with 50 as the control group ^[9]. The treatment group received conventional drug treatment combined with Guipi Decoction and acupoint application, applying the paste to Yongquan (KI1) every night before bedtime and removing it the next morning. After 4 weeks of treatment, it was found that the combined treatment plan was more helpful in alleviating and improving the patients' sleep quality. Dong Yanping et al. treated patients with insomnia of heart-spleen deficiency type with Guipi Decoction combined with acupoint application, and the results showed that acupoint application effectively prolonged the patients' sleep duration, improved sleep efficiency, with an effective rate as high as 96.67% ^[10].

3.4. Massage and Tuina

In terms of mechanism of action, manual stimulation of acupoints and meridians can unblock Qi and blood, relax muscles, tranquilize the mind, promote sleep, regulate the heart spirit, and harmonize Zang-fu organs. Modern studies have shown that it can relieve muscle tension and inhibit excessive cerebral excitement. In clinical application methods:

(1) Techniques

Focus on “guiding Yang into Yin”, performing Tuina along the Du Meridian and Ren Meridian;

(2) Acupoints

Baihui (GV20), Xinshu (BL15), Neiguan (PC6), etc.;

(3) Application

Tonify deficiency and purge excess, which can be combined with abdominal breathing. Su Guoying selected patients with insomnia of heart-spleen deficiency type as the observation group, formulated an intervention plan of Guipi Decoction combined with acupoint massage, and performed kneading and pressing on Sanyinjiao (SP6), Baihui (GV20), Shaochong (HT9), and Shenmen (HT7) in the observation group ^[11]. After 4 weeks, it was found that the sleep efficiency, total sleep time, and total effective rate of the observation group were significantly improved. Rao Yulian et al. focused on the application of acupoint massage in patients with hypertension complicated with insomnia, conducted Meta-analysis of data using RevMan 5.4 software, including 19 studies with 1524 patients (764 in the treatment group and 760 in the control group) ^[12]. Through PSQI score and sleep improvement Meta-analysis results, it was found that the treatment group frequently selected acupoints such as Taixi (KI3), Baihui (GV20), Shenmen (HT7), and Taiyang (EX-HN5), mainly using pushing, pressing, and kneading massage techniques; compared with conventional treatment, acupoint massage had a better effect on improving the sleep quality of patients with hypertension complicated with insomnia, assisted in lowering blood pressure, and thereby improved their quality of life.

3.5. Chinese herbal foot bath

In terms of mechanism of action, the feet are the convergence of meridians. Warmth + drug penetration can unblock meridians, regulate Zang-fu organs, and guide fire back to its origin. Modern studies have shown that it can promote lower limb circulation, regulate the autonomic nervous system, and reduce sympathetic nerve excitement. In clinical application:

(1) Compatibility

Select *Polygala tenuifolia*, *Artemisia argyi*, *Angelica sinensis*, etc., based on syndrome differentiation;

(2) Specifications

Water temperature 40–45 °C, soak for 20–30 minutes, once before bedtime;

(3) Special groups

Strictly control water temperature and duration, combined with foot massage. Chinese herbal foot bath involves decocting drugs into a decoction, using the warm effect of water to allow medicinal ions to penetrate into the human blood and be transported to the whole body's Zang-fu organs, achieving the effect of nourishing blood and tranquilizing the mind. Xu Xiaoyan et al. found through systematic research that after using Chinese herbal foot bath, the sleep time and efficiency of insomnia patients were improved^[13]. Feng Chunlin et al. included 104 patients and found through a controlled trial that the therapy combining syndrome differentiation-based diet and Chinese herbal foot bath improved patients' sleep quality and life satisfaction^[14].

3.6. Five-tone therapy

In terms of mechanism of action, according to the theory of “five tones entering five Zang-fu organs”, the corresponding scales are used to regulate the Qi and blood of Zang-fu organs, focusing on regulating the heart spirit and liver. Modern studies have shown that it can regulate brain function, relieve anxiety, and induce relaxation. In clinical application:

(1) Tone selection

Jue tone for liver stagnation and Qi stagnation, Zhi + Yu tones for heart-kidney disharmony, Gong tone for insufficient Qi and blood;

(2) Specifications

30–60 minutes before bedtime, volume 40–60 decibels;

(3) Synergy

Combined with meditation, select music according to preferences. Zheng Jifeng et al. found through a controlled experiment that music therapy can help insomnia patients fall asleep faster and has an effect on improving sleep status^[15]. Chang Mina et al. selected 146 patients to implement five-tone therapy and found through a controlled experiment that patients who listened to five tones to fall asleep every day had significantly reduced sleep latency and nighttime awakening times^[16].

3.7. Aromatherapy

In terms of mechanism of action, aromatic drugs open the orifices, soothe the liver, and calm the mind, which is suitable for insomnia caused by emotional anxiety. Modern studies have shown that it can regulate neurotransmitters through olfaction, relieve anxiety, and reduce cerebral excitement. In clinical application:

(1) Drugs

Lavender, rose, sandalwood, etc., selected based on syndrome differentiation;

(2) Forms

Aromatherapy, aromatic massage, foot bath;

(3) Adjustment

Avoid intolerable odors, ensure ventilation, and conduct skin sensitivity tests. Wu Dandan et al. proposed

that the use of TCM sachets in the treatment of elderly insomnia can effectively improve the sleep status of elderly insomnia patients, prolong their sleep time and depth, and improve sleep quality [17]. The internationally used SPIEGEL scale was used to compare the sleep latency, total sleep time, nighttime awakening times, sleep depth, nighttime dreaming, and post-awakening status of elderly insomnia patients before and after treatment. Through comparative research, it was found that aromatherapy has an improving effect on the sleep quality of elderly insomnia patients. Among them, medicinal pillows made of aromatic drugs have been applied in clinical trials of insomnia patients, indicating that aromatherapy can improve the sleep status of stroke patients [18].

3.8. Combined application

The principles of combined application include syndrome differentiation-based compatibility, synergistic efficacy, selecting complementary technical combinations, addressing both symptoms and root causes, improving the curative effect of complex insomnia, and ensuring safety. Common application models:

(1) Auricular points + foot bath

Suitable for heart-kidney disharmony and liver stagnation and Qi stagnation types;

(2) Moxibustion + application

Suitable for Yang deficiency and insufficient Qi and blood types;

(3) Aromatherapy + five tones

Suitable for emotion-related insomnia;

(4) Comprehensive multi-technique application

Suitable for chronic intractable insomnia. Grasp the timing and make dynamic adjustments. Zhuo Xin, Tan Yi, Xue Ya et al. integrated TCM techniques, environment creation, emotional nursing and other measures to formulate a bundled nursing intervention plan [19].

The control group received conventional nursing intervention, and the experimental group received bundled nursing intervention. The sleep process, sleep quality, emotional state, and nursing effect between the groups were analyzed. After nursing, the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) score of the experimental group was lower than that of the control group ($p < 0.05$), and the total nursing effective rates of the experimental group and the control group were 95.35% and 81.40% respectively. The trial showed that bundled nursing has a better curative effect on the sleep quality and negative emotions of insomnia patients than conventional nursing.

4. Discussion

Although TCM nursing appropriate techniques have shown good curative effects in the treatment of insomnia patients, there is a lack of systematic, standardized, and scientific application plans in their clinical application, which still need further exploration and development. Current studies are mostly small-sample with short observation periods, and the research quality needs to be improved. In this regard, it is necessary to cooperate with communities, hospitals, elderly care institutions and other organizations to carry out multi-center, large-sample studies. Strictly adopt randomization and allocation concealment, establish a long-term follow-up and safety assessment system, and extend the experimental observation period to 6–12 months. Combine short-term and long-term assessments to verify the efficacy of TCM nursing for insomnia, collect adverse reactions, and improve the safety evaluation standards for TCM nursing of insomnia. The randomization and blinding design of relevant studies are not perfect, and no strict random allocation plans have been formulated. It is difficult to implement double-

blinding in TCM external therapies, leading to a lack of objectivity in research results. In this regard, strengthen diversified research on TCM nursing for insomnia. Invite TCM physicians and nursing experts to construct diagnostic criteria for syndromes such as heart-kidney disharmony, heart-spleen deficiency, and Yin-Yang imbalance using the Delphi method, providing a basis for subsequent nursing technique selection. The standardization of nursing techniques is insufficient, and the application effects of the same nursing technique vary among different research groups. For example, in studies on different insomnia patients, the selection of acupoints, depth of seed embedding, and replacement frequency of auricular seed pressing are different. It is necessary to formulate standardized and user-friendly TCM technical nursing standards to improve patient compliance. In terms of nursing specifications, invite experts to discuss and jointly formulate operating procedures for techniques such as moxibustion, auricular seed pressing, acupoint application, and acupoint massage, and develop standardized operation manuals to facilitate further promotion. In nursing operations, simplify the operation process and directly provide patients with decocted medicine packs or Chinese herbal foot bath tablets. In terms of nursing equipment, integrate intelligent auxiliary equipment, such as fixed-type foot baths and acupoint positioning APPs, to realize self-operation by the elderly. In future clinical applications, it is necessary to follow the principle of syndrome differentiation-based nursing, select TCM appropriate techniques according to the actual situation of different patients, give full play to the advantages of different types of techniques in the treatment of insomnia patients, help patients improve sleep quality and sleep level. In practice, it is necessary to establish and improve a practical guidance system for TCM nursing appropriate techniques for insomnia patients with different syndromes, improve the technical application ability and service level of nursing staff, and further promote TCM appropriate techniques in clinical practice.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Traditional Chinese Medicine nursing appropriate techniques, including moxibustion, auricular seed pressing, acupoint application, massage and Tuina, Chinese herbal foot bath, five-tone therapy, and aromatherapy, demonstrate significant potential in improving sleep quality and clinical outcomes for patients with insomnia. These therapies, grounded in TCM theory and increasingly supported by modern research, offer safe, accessible, and effective complementary approaches to conventional treatment. However, challenges remain in standardizing protocols, ensuring methodological rigor in research, and promoting wider clinical adoption. Future efforts should focus on developing evidence-based, standardized guidelines, conducting large-scale multicenter studies, and integrating intelligent technologies to optimize and personalize TCM nursing interventions, ultimately enhancing the quality of care and life for individuals suffering from insomnia.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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