

Acupuncture

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture has been used for thousands of years, but has only recently started to become integrated into western medicine. Acupuncture is the science of puncturing the skin with needles in order to treat disease.

For a long time acupuncture has existed as part of traditional Chinese medicine, an ancient and esoteric system of medicine involving energy (Qi) flowing around the body in channels (meridians). Acupuncture's mechanism of action is being increasingly understood in western scientific terms.

What problems can acupuncture help and not help?

There is now good scientific evidence for acupuncture's effectiveness in relieving pain in arthritis, for example of the knee and hip, as well as back pain. It is also useful in many other painful conditions, including migraine, menstrual period pain and some sports injuries.

Acupuncture can effectively relieve the nausea associated with surgery, pregnancy and chemotherapy and is also used in some bowel disorders, urinary problems, asthma, hay fever, stress and addictions. It may also aid in recovery after a stroke and can turn 'breech' babies the right way round in the womb in some women during their first pregnancy.

There is no evidence that acupuncture can treat cancer, though it could be used effectively for pain relief.

Acupuncture is remarkably safe when performed by a properly qualified practitioner. However, occasional side effects include an increase in pain (usually only temporary), bruising, dizziness and very rarely skin infections or even a punctured lung. To minimise the risk of infection acupuncture should only be given using sterile disposable needles.

Special precautions need to be taken in pregnancy so it is important to inform your acupuncturist if you are, or suspect that you might be, pregnant.

What does acupuncture involve?

You are likely to have a number of needles, typically between four and ten, but possibly only one, inserted into your skin from half a centimetre up to several centimetres in depth. They are traditionally left in for 10-30 minutes, but some practitioners leave the needles in for only a few seconds.

Acupuncture needles are very thin and do not hurt in the same way as an injection. Manual twirling or a small electrical current (electro acupuncture) may be used to stimulate the needles.

Though the treatment may be completely painless, some acupuncturists attempt to produce a sensation called “de Qi” which is a heaviness, soreness or heat around the needle and is believed to be a sign that the acupuncture point has been correctly needled.

Traditional acupuncturists may use additional techniques such as moxibation; the burning of an herb just above the surface of the skin, either attached to an acupuncture needle or held in a cigar shaped stick.

Cupping is another technique where special cups are placed on the skin and warmed to stimulate the acupuncture point. Some practitioners also use a low energy laser beam to stimulate the acupuncture point without the use of needles.

What will happen during a treatment session?

Before embarking upon acupuncture, it is important to have a diagnosis of your problem made by a doctor to ensure that acupuncture is an appropriate treatment for you. At your first visit, the practitioner will ask you questions about your problem and examine you in a way similar to that in which your doctor would. If following traditional Chinese principles, particular attention may be paid to your tongue and pulse.

Alternatively, the acupuncturist may feel for tender 'trigger' points in the tissues under the skin. People often feel relaxed after a treatment, and it is probably sensible not to drive yourself home.

How many sessions might I need?

Sometimes, for example for a sports injury, only one or two treatments are needed, but more often a course of acupuncture will consist of six or more treatments, particularly for longstanding problems.

Small minorities of people do not respond to acupuncture, and if there is not improvement after six to eight treatments, it is unlikely that acupuncture will help.

Further information

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