



Acupuncture for Pain Management Gains Support with Physicians and Patients

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It is quite common these days to hear about people who turn to acupuncture as a last resort to find relief from chronic nagging and debilitating pain. Those suffering from long-standing low back and neck pain, headaches and migraine, fibromyalgia, carpal tunnel syndrome, and pain related to arthritis and cancer are likely to benefit from acupuncture treatments. Also, acupuncture has been reported to benefit those with nausea related to anesthesia and chemotherapy and drug addiction problems.

It is an effective adjunct treatment, gaining support for its effectiveness and as an attractive drug- and surgery-free option for pain management.

Acupuncture, which was developed by the Chinese, is performed by stimulating designated points of the body through the insertion of needles, finger pressure, application of heat, or a combination of these treatments. According to traditional Chinese medicine, there is a network of energy called chi that flows through the body in different channels called meridians. These channels are related to specific internal functions. Any imbalance in the flow of energy creates a disease process; and the application of acupuncture can correct this imbalance, restoring the human body to normal health.

Scientific Explanation of Acupuncture

At its first encounter with acupuncture, Western medicine was understandably suspicious because explanations of the procedure are bound up with mysterious concepts formulated 3000 years ago. However, in light of understanding of the neurophysiology of pain and scientific explanations of how acupuncture relieves pain, suspicion is giving way to tolerance and acceptance.

The neurologic mechanisms of acupuncture are rapidly becoming evident. Needles used in acupuncture activate small nerve fibers in the muscle, which transmit impulses to the

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spinal cord, and activate centers in the central nervous system releasing a variety of chemicals called neurotransmitters, many of which have pain-relieving properties.

Few studies, however, have examined the role of acupuncture in the management of cardiac and vascular diseases. At this time, the role of acupuncture in the management of cardiovascular diseases can be neither confirmed nor ruled out. Studies are also under way in determining the benefits of acupuncture in the treatment of problems such as asthma, allergies and irritable bowel syndrome.

Acupuncture is done with extremely thin flexible needles made of steel alloy. There is nothing special about the needle, it is merely a tool to correct the energy imbalance in the body, and or release neurotransmitters. There is often a brief “needle prick” sensation as the needle passes through the skin. As the needle begins to work and effects start to occur, one may feel numbness, heat, dull aching or tingling sensation in the vicinity of the needle insertion. Generally, the needles are left in place for about 15-30 minutes. They may be rotated by the practitioner or stimulated by electricity or heat. I find side effects due to acupuncture to be minor and transient.

Strategies for Patients Using Acupuncture

Before seeking acupuncture treatments for a health problem, you should undergo a thorough conventional evaluation by your own medical doctor. Have the acupuncturist explain acupuncture in detail. Be sure your doctor and acupuncturist communicate with each other. Always insist that the acupuncturist uses sterile, disposable needles to avoid the risk of infectious disease like hepatitis and AIDS.

Use of acupuncture is widespread worldwide. In the US, acupuncture is a licensed profession. Professionals who use acupuncture in their practice require a license or certification. Interest in use of acupuncture is also growing in Middle Eastern countries. To locate an acupuncturist in your area call your local hospital, Department of Health/ Licensing Authority or consult your doctor.

The demand and use of acupuncture continues to grow. Of course, more research is needed. But for now, there is sufficient evidence that acupuncture, if appropriately used, can successfully complement conventional care in providing symptomatic assistance and improving the quality of life of patients with pain.

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not be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment. If you have or suspect that you have a medical problem or condition, please contact your physician.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

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