

Does Acupuncture Really Work?

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More than 8 million Americans at one time or another have turned to **acupuncture therapy** for relief from pain or other distress. Today, thousands of acupuncturists—as well as medical doctors, dentists and other health professionals who have learned this technique—are using it to treat everything from migraines to nausea, menstrual cramps to tennis elbow, asthma to addiction.

In 1996, the Food and Drug Administration approved acupuncture needles for licensed practitioners, with the requirement that the needles be sterile, nontoxic and disposed of after a single use. The needles are hair-thin and introduced under the skin at one or more specific sites. When properly done under sterile conditions, acupuncture is safe and relatively painless.

Some insurers reimburse for prescribed acupuncture—even though its effectiveness remains controversial and its presumed mechanism of action unclear. In my own practice, it has helped some patients but not others.

According to Chinese practitioners, the body's vital energy (qi) is carried by two opposing forces—yin and yang—that flow through specific pathways called meridians. Yin reflects qualities that are cold, slow and passive; yang's qualities are hot, excited and active. When the balance between them is disturbed and the flow of qi is interrupted, symptoms develop. It is believed that acupuncture needles, when placed at the appropriate site; alleviate symptoms by restoring normal flow within the meridians.

One widely accepted medical explanation of acupuncture's claimed efficacy is that when needles prick the skin, they cause the brain to release a variety of pain-killing neural chemicals, such as endorphins, enkephalin and other opioids. The expectation of relief alone may induce the same response in the brain—the placebo effect. By whatever mechanism, **modern imaging techniques have shown that acupuncture does stimulate certain areas within the brain and suppress others.**

Clinical studies of acupuncture's effectiveness over the years have yielded varied results. For example, 300 migraine patients in Germany were divided into three groups. In one, acupuncture needles were placed at the prescribed sites; the second group also was “needled,” but randomly (a procedure known as sham acupuncture). The third group received no treatment. All the needled patients underwent 12 treatment sessions, each lasting 30 minutes. The researchers found that both the real and the sham acupuncture recipients reported 50% fewer headache days, while only 15% of those untreated felt better. In this study, placement of the needles apparently made no difference.

Similarly, in another study, 43 patients with irritable bowel syndrome (which causes a variety of gastrointestinal disorders, including cramping and diarrhea) improved after both true and sham acupuncture.

However, it was reported earlier this year in *The Lancet Neurology* that 960 migraine patients responded to acupuncture and conventional drug therapy more significantly than they did to sham therapy. And, in recent research done at the Mayo Clinic, acupuncture was found to ease the pain and fatigue of fibromyalgia (a chronic disorder characterized by musculoskeletal discomfort) much more so than did a simulated procedure in which needles touched the skin but did not penetrate it.

The National Institutes of Health continues to evaluate acupuncture using both traditional Oriental and

Western scientific methods. Licensed acupuncturists are comfortable with this approach and confident that it will clarify how the procedure works. Many schools of acupuncture also are conducting independent research programs.

My personal experience with acupuncture helps me keep an open mind. In 1978, I was invited to China to witness an open-heart procedure on a young woman. She remained wide awake and smiling throughout the operation even though the only anesthesia administered was an acupuncture needle placed in her ear.

Obviously, more research is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions. In the meantime, if you are responding to acupuncture therapy, you should probably continue with it. There's little downside to doing so, and feeling better is what counts.

Treatment Tips

Acupuncture is commonly used to treat chronic pain, headaches and nausea. Here's what you should do before considering it:

- **Look for a certified practitioner.** Forty-two states require certification.
- **Ask how many sessions you will need.** The number varies by condition.
- **Find out if your insurer covers it.** Many do, but you might need authorization.