

Stick with Acupuncture

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When I was in medical school in the 1960s, most physicians dismissed acupuncture as being little different from sticking pins in voodoo dolls. Today, acupuncture is accepted as a legitimate treatment for many painful conditions, thanks to a sizable amount of research showing its effectiveness for pain relief. In 1997, a panel of experts convened by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) found "clear evidence" that acupuncture helps relieve post-operative dental pain. And they deemed it an acceptable alternative or adjunct to conventional therapy for conditions including carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, headache, low back pain, menstrual cramps, osteoarthritis, and tennis elbow. Plus, the panel noted considerable evidence that acupuncture causes the release of natural pain-relieving substances (endorphins). More recently, studies have shown that acupuncture can help children handle pain too, and it's now offered at about a third of pediatric pain clinics nationwide.

A Wide Range of Therapeutic Applications

While I've long advised patients with painful conditions to experiment with acupuncture, I also recommend it for many other problems, and a growing number of studies are demonstrating its versatility. Depending on your condition, an active treatment program may involve some 4 to 10 acupuncture sessions, scheduled once or twice a week. Thereafter, if you notice improvement, you may be put on a maintenance regimen of monthly treatments for another three months or so. Acupuncture is safe when done by a qualified practitioner.

Addictions. Acupuncture may help in treating addictions by promoting relaxation and reducing cravings for various drugs. In one study, acupuncture combined with smoking cessation classes increased the chance of kicking the nicotine habit (*American Journal of Public Health*, October 2002). Some studies suggest it can help overcome cocaine addiction, although other research hasn't found benefits. And acupuncture has been shown to help reduce drinking in long-term alcoholics and relieve withdrawal symptoms in heroin addicts.

Cardiovascular disease. Preliminary studies in China and Russia suggest acupuncture can help lower blood pressure in hypertensive patients, and US researchers are now testing it for this purpose. Also, early research suggests acupuncture may benefit people with advanced heart failure by decreasing excessive activity in the sympathetic nervous system, which regulates heartbeat and blood pressure.

Infertility. A study by German researchers has shown that acupuncture can increase the odds of becoming pregnant

for women undergoing in-vitro fertilization (*Fertility and Sterility*, April 2002). Other research suggests that acupuncture may help a woman conceive by reducing stress, increasing blood flow to the reproductive organs, and helping to normalize ovulation. There's even preliminary evidence that acupuncture may benefit male infertility by increasing sperm count and sperm motility.

Mental health problems. In several studies, acupuncture has shown promise for treating mild to moderate depression, and there's also some evidence that it may help reduce anxiety. Researchers have shown that the stimulation of certain acupuncture points can alter levels of mood-regulating neurotransmitters. NIH-funded studies are currently examining the role of acupuncture in treating bipolar disorder (manic depression) and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Nausea. There's solid evidence that acupuncture is helpful for nausea due to pregnancy, surgery, and chemotherapy. And acupressure wristbands, which stimulate an acupuncture point called PC6 and are sold in drugstores, have been found effective for morning sickness and motion sickness.

Respiratory conditions. I've seen impressive results of acupuncture treatment for acute sinusitis: It can often promote mucus drainage and reduce sinus pain within minutes. Some (but not all) studies have found acupuncture helpful in treating asthma. And preliminary research suggests acupuncture can decrease breathlessness and increase walking distance in people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Stroke rehabilitation. I typically advise stroke patients to try scalp acupuncture, a specialized technique that may increase blood flow to damaged areas of the brain. Acupuncture might prove useful for other neurological conditions as well: Here at the University of Arizona, pediatrician Burris Duncan, MD, has been studying the effects of using either acupuncture or osteopathic manipulation as adjunct therapy for children with spastic cerebral palsy. He says that many parents report improvements in their children with the use of either of these two therapies.

I advise working with an acupuncturist who is experienced in treating your particular condition. Word of mouth can help you find one, or you can contact the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine at www.nccaom.org or (703) 548-9004, or the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture (MDs only) at www.medicalacupuncture.org or (323) 937-5514.

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