

Acupuncture for Pain

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What Is “Acupuncture”?

The term “acupuncture” usually refers to the insertion of thin metal acupuncture needles into specific sites on the body for treatment or prevention of diseases and pain. It may also refer to other methods of stimulation, such as injection of fluid vitamin B12 into a point (i.e., “aquapuncture”); electrical stimulation of an acupuncture needle, (i.e., “electro-acupuncture”); low-level laser light stimulation (i.e., laserpuncture); or local heating with a smoldering herb (i.e., “moxibustion”). Some veterinarians perform “gold bead implantation,” which is potentially risky and unsupported by controlled research studies, as discussed below.

“Medical acupuncture” integrates biomedical principles with Chinese medical traditions, leading to the reinterpretation of ancient concepts through a modern scientific perspective. In so doing, medical acupuncture brings biologic, neurophysiologic, and neuroanatomic principles to the practice of acupuncture. Historically, acupuncture began as a bloodletting technique, and acupuncture sites related to “pulsing points” or other sites of blood vessel access. Since nerves often follow vessels, inserting needles into vessels and nearby somatic structures produced a variety of neurophysiologic effects. As acupuncture needle construction became more refined; needles were thinner and designed not for cutting but purely for point stimulation. Unfortunately, acupuncture was “reinvented” into an energy-based intervention in the early 1900’s by a French author, and the lines drawn in acupuncture diagrams were misinterpreted lines of energy conduction rather than neurovascular pathways. This mistaken idea persists today in non-medical acupuncture circles.

In contrast to medical acupuncture Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) refers to a healthcare system developed fewer than a hundred years ago under the rule of Mao Tse-tung. TCM re-digested ancient Chinese medical ideas, making them more readily assimilated by lay practitioners and Westerners. TCM tends to be energy-based and retains the metaphorical approach to medicine from ancient times. However, the “energy” that many acupuncturists feel they are moving with needle stimulation actually represents a mistranslation of the word “qi”, and no research has validated the idea that acupuncture works by moving energy. However, extensive evidence does support its neurophysiological basis.

Professor Long-xiang Huang of the Acupuncture Research Institute, from the Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Beijing, studied ancient acupuncture texts for decades, and found that when clinical experience failed to fit with existing theory, facts were suppressed in order to ensure continuation of the theory. Some call this “cutting the foot to fit the shoe”. As stated by the authors of the recently published *Biomedical*

Acupuncture for Pain Management, “Thus, classical acupuncture as we know it today is made up of theories and clinical experience that are valuable, mixed with fallacious concepts and imperfect explanations.”ⁱ

Why and When to Try Acupuncture for Pain

Research has shown that acupuncture can be beneficial for an extensive array of conditions, including internal medicine problems, musculoskeletal problems, gastrointestinal and hepatobiliary disorders, mood disorders and addiction in humans, and urological problems and neurologic dysfunction. Still, though, the most common medical problems acupuncture treats relate to pain.

Back and neck pain

Humans frequently develop myofascial pain in their neck or low back; non-human animals likewise display muscle tension and pain along their spine, most often in the thoracolumbar region. Myofascial pain arises in the muscles and its enveloping fascia, and causes restriction in movement and tenderness to palpation. It can accompany other medical problems such as disc disease or chronic abdominal pain, or it can arise as a result of trauma and stress. Acupuncture can help dissipate the pain by causing muscle relaxation, endorphin release, and many other pain-relieving benefits within the nervous system.

Arthritis

Acupuncture provides anti-inflammatory effects as well as pain relief. Although medications may still be necessary to relieve pain from severe arthritis, acupuncture can add an adjunctive level of comfort and mobility improvement.

Neuropathic pain

Acupuncture can sometimes help neuropathic pain, defined as pain stemming from nerve injury, circulatory compromise, or other deteriorating influences. Conditions related to neuropathic pain include spinal cord injury, traumatic nerve injury, and diabetic neuropathy.

Cancer pain

Cancer pain may arise either from the invasion of the tumor itself, the progression of the disease including metastasis, or as a result of treatment with radiation therapy, surgery, or chemotherapy. Acupuncture can provide a welcome and effective additional layer of pain control for patients suffering from this disease or the effects of treatment, and improve the quality of life of survivors. Amputees may especially benefit from the relief of strain on the musculoskeletal system.

Postsurgical pain

Acupuncture can speed recovery from surgery not only by providing pain relief, but also by promoting recovery of digestive and urinary function, and therefore patients' ability to return home from the hospital.

Other types of pain

Research continues to strengthen the evidential basis of acupuncture for a long list of pain complaints. Searching medical databases such as Medline will provide the latest applications and research pertaining to the pain problem in question.

Caveats

Be aware that there are veterinarian acupuncturists who refuse to treat animals that are receiving concurrent treatment with steroid medications or opioids, mistakenly believing that these products will negate the effects of treatment. Others may not treat an animal with cancer, based on the unsubstantiated fear that acupuncture will promote metastasis because of its beneficial effects on circulation.

Gold Bead Implants

Gold bead implants became popular in the 1980s in veterinary acupuncture as a form of "permanent acupuncture." This technique involves implanting fragments of gold jeweler's wire, gold-plated pellets, or magnets. The most common applications include arthritis, degenerative myelopathy, wobbler's syndrome, and epilepsy, but research does not show that gold bead implants outperform regular acupuncture provided at similar locations, and the risks of implanting irretrievable bits of metal in the body outweigh potential benefits. Risks of gold bead implantation include migration of the metal fragments into the nervous system or elsewhere, infection, interference with diagnostic imaging, and cellulitis.

What Information to Supply When Referring for Acupuncture

Veterinarian acupuncturists require the same amount and type of historical, physical, and diagnostic information as any other veterinary specialist would.

What to Ask for from the Veterinary Acupuncturist

Expect the same sort of feedback from a veterinary acupuncturist that you would from any other veterinary specialist, including a preliminary treatment schedule and outcome goals. The acupuncturist should be able to describe her or his assessment and treatment of the patient in clear, unambiguous terms.

What to Expect in Terms of Patient Outcomes and Length of Treatment

A typical trial period of acupuncture involves a “start-up” routine of twice- or once-weekly treatments (twice-weekly is preferred) for a total of four sessions. Some veterinary acupuncturists require clients to initially commit to at least eight sessions. Patients who are likely to respond favorably to acupuncture usually do so within the first few treatments; however, at first the benefits may only last 1 to 2 days. The goal is to build a cumulative and longer-lasting effect by delivering frequent sessions at the outset. Once a satisfactory level of improvement occurs, the acupuncturist will usually increase the time interval between sessions to that which allows sustained improvement with the fewest treatments.

Chronic problems may, but not always, take longer to see changes, and patients may need prolonged and perhaps lifelong maintenance (e.g., monthly) treatment for severe dysfunction. Acute illness or pain and swelling from recent trauma or surgery usually resolve more quickly—perhaps with only a few treatments.

Follow-up Communication

If a new problem develops while the patient is under the care of the veterinary acupuncturist, he or she should alert the referring veterinarian and ensure that the patient returns to the primary care provider for further workup. Any herbal, nutraceutical, homeopathic, or other recommendations made by the acupuncturists should be discussed with the primary care veterinarian before instituting, especially in cases in which herb–drug interactions may result.

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ⁱ Ma Y-T, Ma M, and Cho ZH. *Biomedical Acupuncture for Pain Management. An Integrative Approach*. St. Louis: Elsevier, 2005, p. xv.