

# Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

## Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a non-drug, non-invasive therapy that may produce a variety of benefits—from pain management to helping with nausea associated with chemotherapy. According to the 2002 National Health Interview Survey, an estimated 8.2 million Americans have been to an acupuncturist, and an estimated 2.1 million U.S. adults used acupuncture in the previous year. Since the use of acupuncture has spread widely in the U.S. in the past 20 years, researchers are studying the benefits of acupuncture for many conditions, including low-back pain, headaches, and osteoarthritis of the knee.

Acupuncture may be useful as an independent treatment for some conditions, but it can also be used as a complement to other healthcare therapies.

### The philosophy of acupuncture

One of the oldest healing arts, acupuncture originated in China and other Asian countries thousands of years ago. Acupuncture practitioners believe that all illness is caused from interference with the flow of energy, also called chi, and imbalance of two opposing and complementary forces within the body: yin, the cold and passive aspect, and yang, the hot, active, and excited aspect.

To restore the balance between yin and yang and to unblock chi, acupuncture stimulates specific points of the body through several techniques, including insertion of hair-thin metal needles through the skin. In Chinese medicine, chi is believed to flow through pathways (meridians) in the body, which are accessible through more than 350 acupuncture points. Western medicine explains the effect of acupuncture through stimulating nerves, muscles, and connective tissue, which increases the body's natural activity to regulate pain and increase blood flow.

### Before your visit

- Ask your doctor of chiropractic or another health care provider for a referral. Some doctors of chiropractic practice acupuncture, too.



- Ask people you trust for recommendations.
- Check online referral listings of national acupuncture organizations.
- Check the acupuncturist's credentials. A license is required to practice acupuncture; however, education and training standards, as well as license-obtaining requirements, vary among states. Most states require non-physician acupuncturists to pass an exam through the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.
- Interview the provider. Ask what the treatment involves, how likely it is to be effective for your condition, and how much it will cost.
- Check with your insurance company to find out if the treatment is covered by your insurance.

### During your visit

During your first office visit, the acupuncture practitioner may ask you for details related to your health condition, lifestyle, and behavior. Be sure to tell the provider about all treatments or medications you are taking and all conditions you have. Ask how many visits the treatment will take approximately.

While acupuncture providers may have different styles, a typical visit—which usually lasts about 30 minutes—includes an exam and assessment of your condition, insertion of needles, and advice on home care. Before the needles are placed, you will lie down on a comfortable surface face down, face up, or on your side, depending on where the needles will be inserted. Usually the procedure isn't painful; however, you may feel a brief, sharp sensation when the needle is inserted and when it reaches the correct depth. Sometimes, the needles are gently moved or stimulated with electricity or heat. Each treatment may require the insertion of as many as 12 needles, which stay in place for 5 to 20 minutes.

### Benefits and risks

Just as with other therapies, acupuncture has benefits and risks. On the benefit side, acupuncture:

- Has few side effects
- Can be a useful complement to other therapies
- Is becoming widely available
- Helps control certain types of pain

If you have a bleeding disorder or are taking blood thinners, acupuncture may not be for you.

Acupuncture treatment is experienced differently by different people—some report feeling energized by treatment; others feel relaxed. Most report feeling no or minimal pain from the insertion of the needles. Soreness and pain during treatment can result from improper needle placement, a defect in the needle, or the movement of the patient. Some experience bleeding or bruising at the needle sites.

If acupuncture is not provided by a properly qualified practitioner, however, potentially serious side effects can occur. Acupuncture needles, which are regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, should be ster-

### The effects of acupuncture

In addition to controlling pain, acupuncture may be used for:

- Stroke rehabilitation
- Headaches, especially migraines
- Menstrual cramps
- Tennis elbow
- Fibromyalgia
- Myofascial pain
- Osteoarthritis
- Low-back pain
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Asthma
- Dental pain
- Labor pain

ile and non-toxic, and should come in single-use packages labeled for use by qualified providers only. Some complications have been reported from inadequately sterilized needles. Inappropriately delivered treatment can result in infections and injured organs. These risks, however, are low when acupuncture is provided by a competent, certified practitioner. ■

### Sources:

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/acupuncture/>  
[www.mayoclinic.com/health/acupuncture/SA00086](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/acupuncture/SA00086)  
[www.webmd.com/fibromyalgia/tc/acupuncture-topic-overview](http://www.webmd.com/fibromyalgia/tc/acupuncture-topic-overview)



For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, go to the Patient Information section on ACA's Web site at [www.acatoday.org/Patients](http://www.acatoday.org/Patients) or call 703 276 8800.

*Nataliya Schetchikova, PhD,*  
*director of clinical & research publications, **Writer***



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