

ACUPUNCTURE: What's the Point?

Acupuncture has been used in the Western world since the 19th Century. It is believed to work by modifying pain transmission at the level of the spinal cord. Acupuncture also stimulates the body to release endorphins and encephalons that are the body's own natural painkillers. Fiona Jacobson, Principal Physiotherapist at physio2go St. Albans has been using acupuncture in her treatment plans for the last 15 years.

Acupuncture is an ancient system of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). The traditional view is that 'energy' Qi flows round the body in channels 'meridians'. If the Qi is flowing freely then the body is in a healthy state. By inserting needles into the acupuncture points on the meridians a trained acupuncturist is able to balance the movement and levels of Qi within the body. An imbalance of Qi causes pain, disease and disability.

Will Acupuncture work for me?

You do not need to believe in Acupuncture for it to work. Research has shown that most people gain some pain relief from treatment with acupuncture, although it does not work for everyone or for every condition.

A large number of conditions respond well to acupuncture ranging from acute injuries like whiplash to chronic conditions such as osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. The effect of acupuncture is cumulative. Some people respond very rapidly while others may need more sessions. Sometimes particularly in chronic conditions the treatment may initially aggravate the pain but then usually a good response is achieved. Often at least 3 sessions will be needed before your therapist will be sure that you are responding well and as many as 8 to 10 sessions may be required to achieve a good result. People with chronic long-term conditions usually have 'top up' treatments every few months to keep the symptoms under control.

Is it Safe?

Acupuncture is a very safe treatment modality. It is virtually painless and has few side effects. It works naturally by stimulating the body itself. Possible side effects include some bruising at the needle site, nausea, dizziness/fainting and increased pain. Rare side effects are infection and an allergic reaction to the needles. Acupuncture is administered using sterile disposable needles that are then stimulated manually, electrically or by using heat (moxibustion). There are certain circumstances when acupuncture should not be used, these include an allergy to metal, skin infection in the area to be needled, a needle phobia, unstable epilepsy and diabetes. Certain points should not be used during pregnancy. Extra care must be taken when treating patients who are taking steroids or anticoagulants, have a pacemaker or a deficient immune system.

Why have Acupuncture from a Physiotherapist?

Physiotherapists are in a unique position to be able to combine acupuncture with other more traditional treatment modalities for the relief of muscular skeletal pain. These may include joint mobilisation/manipulation, muscle strengthening/re-education and exercise.

The aim of physiotherapy is to help alleviate pain and to restore normal movement and function in the body. Chartered Physiotherapists are bound by a strict professional and ethical code. Acupuncture has to be practised by Physiotherapists according to the Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists (AACP) guidelines for 'safe practice' together with the Chartered Society of Physiotherapist (CSP) guidelines for 'scope of practice'. The AACP is a clinical interest group. Its members are required to complete a validated training course before being able to practice acupuncture and in order to remain on the register fulfil a minimum number of hours CPD. For further information visit their site www.aacp.uk.com.

Case Study

Mrs P is a 75 yr old lady with osteoarthritic changes in her Right knee. In April'05 she underwent a small investigative operation that resulted in the removal of part of her medial cartilage. This gave some degree of pain relief. However over the next 9 months the pain in her knee became progressively worse. Mrs P attended for physiotherapy and after an assessment it was decided to try and treat the pain using acupuncture. Treatment consisted of 4 sessions over a period of 3 weeks. 5 needles were used, being inserted into various points around the knee and in the foot, which have been clinically proven to be of benefit in the treatment of osteoarthritic knees. The needles were manually stimulated and left in situ for 20 minutes. This settled the pain for 2 months, after which Mrs P returned for another 3 sessions to which she responded very well.

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