

THERAPY SERVICES

ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT FOR PAIN RELIEF IN MUSCULOSKELETAL CONDITIONS

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is one of the oldest recorded forms of medicine having been used in China for over 3,000 years. The insertion of a fine needle into the skin is believed to reduce pain and muscle spasm.

What sort of problems can acupuncture be used for?

Acupuncture can be used to treat many medical problems but therapy postgraduate training courses cover its use for the relief of joint and muscle pain in musculoskeletal conditions.

Will acupuncture work for me?

Acupuncture does not work for everybody. About a quarter of patients called 'non responders' do not seem to benefit from acupuncture. The effect of acupuncture is usually accumulative and pain relief builds up as treatment progresses. Some patients may feel worse initially, and most generally require at least three treatments before noticing any change.

What are the advantages of acupuncture?

Acupuncture can help by reducing pain and muscle spasm and help facilitate the healing process. It is believed to reduce pain by stimulating the brain to produce chemicals such as endorphins (for natural pain relief), melatonin (which promotes sleep) and serotonin (to promote well-being).

Is acupuncture safe?

Acupuncture is very safe. Therapists at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital undertake a postgraduate qualification in acupuncture and adhere to guidelines to maintain their competency to practice. They take responsibility for the safety of themselves and their patients with the safe and hygienic insertion of needles and their safe disposal after the treatment.

What are the possible side effects of acupuncture?

The following are known (based on research) possible adverse effects associated with acupuncture, your therapist will discuss these with you and explain if you are at any enhanced risk prior to starting treatment:

- Bleeding and bruising (3%); mild aggravation of symptoms (3%), of which 70-85% resolve by themselves
- Mild pain at the needle site (1%); drowsiness (1%); dizziness (0.6%)
- Pain not at needle site (0.5%)
- Nausea (0.3%); feeling faint (0.3%); headache (0.1%)
- Stuck or bent needle (0.1%)
- Allergy or infection (up to 0.2%)
- Collapsed lung (0.0002% i.e. less than 2 per 1 million) (AACP 2016)

I've always heard that acupuncture is painful. Is it?

The needles are very thin - much finer than an injection needle. It is normal to feel a slight prick as the needle is inserted.

Are there any times that I should not have acupuncture?

Yes. You will **not** be given acupuncture if you have:

- Broken, fragile or infected skin, or irregular or bleeding moles, or unidentified lumps
- A metal allergy to stainless steel or nickel
- A pacemaker, artificial heart valve or other cardiac problem
- Unstable epilepsy and/or a history of recent seizure
- Poorly controlled diabetes as acupuncture may lower the blood sugar
- Any other unstable medical condition
- A needle phobia or if you are overly anxious about receiving treatment
- A blood clotting disorder e.g. haemophilia, or a history of recent stroke, or if you are taking blood thinning medication

You will **not** be given acupuncture if you are having treatment for cancer and:

- Are receiving chemotherapy
- Have a history of spinal instability
- Hormones levels of serotonin, melatonin or endorphin are being carefully monitored

If you are **pregnant** then you will **not** be given acupuncture without further medical consultation.

Needling is also used **with caution** in some situations. You should tell your therapist if you have:

- A problem with low blood pressure
- A condition with a higher risk of infection such as viral hepatitis
- An auto-immune disease e.g. Lupus or HIV, or history of splenectomy, or are on medicine that lowers the immune system
- Reduced skin sensation e.g. a diabetic neuropathy
- A skin problem such as psoriasis that may flare with treatment
- A joint replacement, as needles are not inserted into artificial joints
- Surgery to dissect lymph nodes (armpit/groin) with lymphoedema
- A strong reaction to acupuncture in the past

You should **always** ensure that you have eaten within 4 hours of treatment and you don't have cold or flu-like symptoms or feel generally unwell on the day of your appointment.

What exactly will happen when I come for acupuncture?

Your therapist will find out more about your condition by asking questions and carrying out a physical examination. You will have an opportunity to discuss treatment options, including acupuncture. If you are happy to proceed you will be asked to give your **written** consent to have acupuncture treatment.

You will then be asked to undress as much as needed and positioned on the bed or in a chair comfortably for up to 20 minutes. Single-use sterile needles are used. The needle is guided into the soft tissues usually to a depth of ¼ - ½ inch. Needles will usually be inserted around the area where you feel pain however some may be placed in your head, hands or feet or in the unaffected side. Needles may stay in for 10 minutes initially and up to 20 minutes in subsequent treatments. They may be stimulated by turning the needles gently to achieve the sensation of **de Qi**. This is described as a mild ache, numbness or warmth and is usually temporary and not unpleasant. This is thought to indicate the movement of energy at the acupuncture point.

At every visit you will be asked if you would still like to have acupuncture, or if there are any reasons why you shouldn't.

How many treatments will I need?

Treatments are normally given at 1-2 weekly intervals. Most patients receive a course of 4-6 treatments. If you have not noticed any improvement after 3-4 visits your therapist may decide that you are unlikely to respond. Following discharge you will be able to assess any beneficial effects over the next few weeks and months.

What happens if I don't want acupuncture?

If you don't want acupuncture your therapist may offer you another type of treatment, which may include exercises, joint mobilisation/manipulation, muscle re-education, electrotherapy, or hydrotherapy.

For **more information** please contact:

- The Therapy Department, Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital Tel. 01603 286990
- **NHS 111**, which make it easier for you to access local NHS Healthcare services
- **Versus Arthritis** Tel. 0300 790 0400 (www.versusarthritis.org/)
- **Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists** Tel. 01733 390006 (www.aacp.org.uk)