

## THERAPY SERVICES

### ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT FOR PAIN RELIEF

#### What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is one of the oldest recorded forms of medicine having been used in China for over 3,000 years. Traditional acupuncture is based on the belief that an energy flows through the body in channels called meridians.

The energy flow is known as Qi. Practitioners who use acupuncture in a traditional way believe that if the body suffers an injury, the flow of Qi is thought to be disrupted. Therefore, traditional acupuncture aims to restore Qi by using needles at specific points on the body to help Qi flow freely again, and therefore improve pain and restore health.

#### What are the benefits of having acupuncture?

The insertion of a fine needle into the skin is believed to stimulate sensory nerves under the skin and in the muscles. 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). It is likely that these naturally released substances are responsible for the beneficial effects experienced with acupuncture.

#### 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.

#### Is acupuncture safe to have during pregnancy?

Yes. However, acupuncture is not carried out in the first trimester of pregnancy (up to 13 weeks) because if miscarriage is going to occur it is most likely at this time. Before you and your Physiotherapist decide whether acupuncture is right for you, you will be asked about any other health conditions that you may have, which may mean that acupuncture is not appropriate.

This would include:

- A diagnosis of pre-eclampsia
- Recent or continuous vaginal bleeding
- If your baby is moving less than normal.

#### What 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.

- On the day of your treatment, you will be asked if you would still like to have acupuncture and if there are any reasons why you shouldn't. 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 remove any clothing over the area to be treated and made comfortable on the bed or in a chair.
- 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.
- 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.

### **What should I feel during my acupuncture treatment?**

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

Your therapist will be looking to gain what the Chinese call 'De Qi' from your treatment. This literally means 'to find the Qi'. De Qi sensation has been described in many ways including 'a relieving ache or pain', 'a spreading feeding', 'numbness', 'tingling', 'dullness', 'heaviness' or 'warmth'.

This is usually felt at the needle sites but may travel up or down your body from this area. You should be able to tolerate this feeling and not find it unpleasant. Experiencing 'De Qi' is thought to mean that energy flow is being restored in your body. Sometimes for 'De Qi' to be felt your physiotherapist may ask to gently turn the acupuncture needles once they are in place.

### **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)

### **How many treatments will I need?**

The number of acupuncture sessions that are needed can vary from person to person. Treatments are normally given at 1-2 weekly intervals. Most patients receive a course of 4-6 treatments. 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 3 treatments before noticing any change. However, if you have not noticed any improvement after 3-4 visits your therapist may decide that you are unlikely to respond.

### 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

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.

For **more information** please contact:

- The Therapy Department, Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital Tel. 01603 286990. Pelvic and Maternal Health (01603 287130).
- **Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists** Tel. 01733 390006 ([www.aacp.org.uk](http://www.aacp.org.uk))

