

Background

Acupuncture may be offered to you as part of your course of physiotherapy. It is one of a number of different types of treatment that your physiotherapist can offer alongside others such as exercise, joint mobilisation and general rehabilitation to relieve pain and help you return to good health.

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture originated in China over two thousand years ago. The traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) model of this technique supports the concept of using needles inserted into the skin at specific points to influence the movement and levels of 'Qi' (i.e. energy or life force) within the body. According to TCM theory, any change in the flow or balance of Qi can lead to pain, disease and disability.

Scientific research has examined the effectiveness of acupuncture in various conditions. The use of acupuncture for the treatment of pain is supported by an ever-growing body of evidence. Acupuncture combined with physiotherapy is widely accepted within both the National Health Service and private practice. This is evident in the recommendation by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) that acupuncture should be available as a cost-effective short-term treatment for persistent non-specific low back pain (source: NICE 2009).

When is treatment with acupuncture appropriate?

Following careful assessment, acupuncture will be suggested if your physiotherapist believes it will help to improve the effectiveness of your overall treatment.

Why choose a physiotherapist?

Your healthcare specialist will use an individually tailored course of acupuncture for your symptoms as part of an evidence-based treatment programme. All physiotherapists using acupuncture are bound by rules of professional conduct. They are required to train to a recognised minimum standard and adhere to the mandatory number of hours of continuing professional development.

When should acupuncture not be used?

There are certain circumstances in which acupuncture should not be used:

- if you have a needle phobia
- if you have a known infection in the area to be treated
- if you have a known metal allergy, specifically a reaction to stainless steel

When should acupuncture be used with caution?

You should inform your physiotherapist if:

- you have haemophilia or another blood-clotting disorder
- you are taking blood-thinning medication, such as anticoagulants
- you are known to have a blood-borne virus
- you are pregnant or trying to conceive
- you suffer from epilepsy
- you have an artificial cardiac pacemaker
- you are diabetic
- you have a deficient or weakened immune system

These conditions do not exclude you from having acupuncture, but they will influence its application. Your physiotherapist needs to be aware of them!

What does acupuncture treatment involve?

Physiotherapists use sterile, single-use needles. These are very thin – much finer than an injection needle – and are inserted quickly through the skin into the tissues. Acupuncture should not be painful, although some people report experiencing a pinprick or scratch-like sensation.

Once the needles are in place, you may feel a mild ache, numbness, warmth or heavy sensation at or around the area being treated. This should not be unpleasant. The feeling is known as 'De Qi' and is a sign that the body's inbuilt pain-relieving mechanisms are being activated. Your physiotherapist may gently stimulate the needles to attain the feeling of De Qi several times during treatment.

Needles can also be stimulated using electrical impulses. This is called electro-acupuncture. The needles are coupled to a battery-operated machine and produce a tingling sensation at the site of insertion. Scientific research suggests that low-frequency impulses can help to reduce long-standing chronic pain while high-frequency stimulation can be more helpful in managing acute pain and muscle spasm.

How many needles will be used?

A treatment will usually involve the insertion of between two and sixteen needles.

How long will the needles remain in place?

Needles can be inserted for as little as a few seconds or minutes. More commonly, needles will remain in place for between ten and thirty minutes.

Where will the needles go?

Needles may be inserted:

- near to or around the painful area
- away from the painful area (e.g. in the hands or feet)
- on the opposite side of the body

Scientific research has shown that needling away from an area of pain is effective. This can be particularly useful if the affected area is very sensitive.

How many treatments are needed?

The frequency and number of acupuncture treatments depend on the specific condition being treated and how you respond to therapy. Each session should be tailored to you and your condition. Research suggests that a course of six to ten treatments is required to achieve the best results for long-standing painful conditions such as osteoarthritis of the knee. If your symptoms remain the same after these are completed, it is unlikely that acupuncture will help you. If you do gain benefit, the period of symptom ease is varied and uncertain. Some people experience lasting relief. Your physiotherapist will discuss your individual management plan with you.

Is acupuncture safe?

Members of the Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists (AACP) are required to train to an internationally recognised minimum standard, are bound by a professional code of conduct through the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and are regulated by the Health Professions Council (HPC). Data on acupuncture suggest that minor side effects such as bleeding and bruising occur infrequently. Other minor side effects (e.g. discomfort around the needle site, feeling faint or light-headed, and drowsiness or sleepiness) are even less common.

Serious side effects are very rare indeed. These highly unusual problems (source: Witt et al. 2009) include:

- damage to an internal organ caused by a needle
- infection
- injury to nerves

If you have any further queries, please ask your physiotherapist.

References

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2009) *Low Back Pain: Early Management of Persistent Non-specific Low Back Pain*. NICE Clinical Guideline 88. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, London.

Witt C. M., Pach D., Brinkhaus B., et al. (2009) Safety of acupuncture: results of a prospective observational study with 229,230 patients and introduction of a medical information and consent form. *Forschende Komplementärmedizin* **16** (2), 91–97.

Practice stamp



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Acupuncture in Physiotherapy

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