

# Acupuncture for Arthritis

**A**cupuncture has been around for over 2,000 years as a strong component in Eastern and Chinese medicine. However, it has grown into acceptance in Western medicine and is now used often in clinical practice. Although the exact mechanism underlying its efficacy is not fully understood, research – although limited – has shown promise in some patients for acupuncture helping with their arthritis symptoms.

The traditional theory of acupuncture is based on essential life energy called 'qi' (pronounced 'chee') which flows through the body along 20 invisible channels called 'meridians'. If energy is blocked or out of balance, illness or pain results. There are over 2,000 acupuncture points connected to the meridians. Stimulating those points with needles is said to correct the flow of qi and alleviate pain.

In Western medicine, acupuncture is used in a more targeted way and is called 'dry needling'. A needle is inserted directly into the painful area (muscle, tendon, soft tissue) triggering a series of physiological responses. These responses include nerve signalling, increased blood flow, and an inflammatory immune response that promotes healing. These physiological changes are the basis of reducing pain and improving symptoms. The insertion of a needle also triggers the release of

neurotransmitters (nerve messengers) called endorphins and enkephalins, which scientists believe reduce the sensation of pain. Acupuncture can control or reduce the release of cortisol, a hormone associated with inflammation, stress and anxiety.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

In patients with stiff, painful joints, regular acupuncture was found to reduce pain and improve function (as measured by how far they could walk in 6 minutes) compared to their counterparts who received control treatment. However, other studies have had challenges showing positive results and so more research is needed on acupuncture use for arthritis.

Some experts question whether pain relief noted in the acupuncture studies is real or the result of a placebo effect – patients feeling better simply because of needles applied to their skin. Either way, if the treatment is offering pain relief or a reduction in anxiety and emotional stress without causing harm, then why shouldn't a patient choose acupuncture as a treatment option?

## HOW TO TRY ACUPUNCTURE

The benefit you may receive could depend on the severity of your arthritis, and how often you get treated. Before trying acupuncture, find a qualified professional (this could include an acupuncturist, physical therapist, osteopath or chiropractor).

### 1. Consider the Risks

All therapies come with both risks and benefits. For acupuncture these may include:

- bleeding, bruising or soreness/tenderness at the point of insertion;
- the possibility of infection from the use of unsterilised needles; and
- in very rare cases, damage to an internal organ if a needle breaks.

Acupuncture or dry needling needles are regulated medical devices and are thus

manufactured and labelled to maintain certain standards.

The needles are individually packed, sterile, nontoxic, disposable, and labelled 'for single use only' by a licensed practitioner. The therapist performing the acupuncture is responsible for preparing your skin with sterile or alcohol swaps to ensure the point of insertion is clean to reduce the risk of infection.

### 2. What to Expect

- An acupuncturist will examine a person and assess their condition, before inserting one or more thin, sterile needles, and offer advice.
- You typically sit or lie down during the procedure. People may feel a very brief stinging or tingling sensation upon needle insertion.
- The needles stay in place for 5 to 20 minutes, possibly longer. During this time a dull ache or warm sensation around the needle may be experienced. In some practices, the acupuncturist may apply heat around the needles once inserted.
- The number of treatments may depend on the individual and how they are responding. Chronic pain conditions like arthritis may need one or two treatments a week over several weeks/months.

Acupuncture is a complementary therapy and should not take the place of doctor-recommended treatments including pharmacological medication or exercise therapy. It can be done in conjunction with manual and physical therapy. Over time, you may become less dependent on pain medication as the therapy takes effect.

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