

Acupuncture and Back Pain

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Back pain costs the NHS 500 million pounds a year and the economy a staggering 10 billion pounds a year in lost working days. It's thought that more than three quarters of us will suffer from it at some point. Many of those affected feel they get no relief from conventional medicine – but perhaps the ancient Chinese practice of acupuncture could hold at least some of the answers.

The Chinese have used needles in their medicine for thousands of years, working on the principle that there are hundreds of points on the body that link to invisible pathways for the body's qi, or vital energy. The theory is that by stimulating the correct points, using very fine stainless steel needles, you can release blocked qi. While there is skepticism in the West about the theory, the results have impressed many doctors, and acupuncture is now available in many areas on the NHS.

Now research carried out at Ruhr and Regensburg Universities in Germany suggest that acupuncture is much more effective than traditional medicine in helping to ease back pain – BUT there's a catch. Researchers examined 1,162 adults who were suffering from chronic back pain, dividing them into three groups – those receiving acupuncture, those having "fake" acupuncture and those given conventional treatments, including painkillers, heat and physical therapy. All the patients received about ten 30 minute sessions of their therapy.



All in the mind?



After six months of treatment, 47 per cent of patients in the real acupuncture group said they felt better, while 44 per cent improved in the fake acupuncture group and 27 per cent in the conventional care group saw an improvement.

"Patients experience not only reduced pain intensity, but also improvements in the disability that often results from back pain and therefore in their quality of life", says Dr Heinz Endres, who led the study.

He believes that his findings are in line with a theory that pain messages to the brain can be blocked by competing stimuli – an idea that's utilized in other pain management techniques. Because both the fake and the real acupuncture showed very similar results, he puts it down to a "superplacebo" effect – both treatments triggered a release of the body's natural pain-relieving endorphins.

The study back up finds published in the British Medical Journal last year, which found that a short course of acupuncture could benefit patients with low back pain. "Through these controlled research findings demonstrating the effectiveness of acupuncture, we believe that both the medical health profession and members of the public will see the benefits of acupuncture as part of an integrated healthcare service", says Mike O'Farrell of the British Acupuncture Council.

It's estimated that around two per cent of the UK population uses acupuncture every year, but that figure could rise with the news that the Government is introducing statutory regulation of acupuncture and its practitioners some time next year.

Mike says that this is good news: “our hope it that, after regulations, the decision makers will have increased awareness and confidence to offer acupuncture more widely”

More evidence from research

Dr Endres concluded that, **real or fake**, “**acupuncture represents a highly promising and effective treatment option for chronic back pain**”.

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