



## **Children May Benefit From Acupuncture**

Acupuncture has been shown to be helpful in treating a variety of conditions in children. Acupuncture needles are solid and much smaller than the hollow needles used for vaccinations. Patients can feel the needle pierce the skin, but there is no pain. However, because children may be afraid of needles, getting their cooperation may be difficult, depending on their age.

Acupuncture is an ancient practice in which very fine needles are inserted into the skin at strategic points on the body to relieve pain and treat disease. The Chinese developed acupuncture centuries ago according to the theory that energy flows through channels between the surface of the body and internal organs. Pain and disease are the result of these channels becoming blocked. By placing needles at one end of the channel or the other, healthy energy can be restored.

Western medicine's view is that the placement of acupuncture needles at specific pain points releases endorphins and opioids, the body's natural painkillers, and perhaps immune system cells as well as neurotransmitters and neurohormones in the brain. Research has shown that glucose and other bloodstream chemicals become elevated after acupuncture.

### **Jane B. Pettit Comprehensive Pain Management Center**

At the pain center, acupuncture treatments often include inserting needles into locations on the ear that correspond with body "trigger points." This is usually in addition to inserting needles directly into the body's trigger points. Sometimes very tiny needles are left in the ears for a couple of weeks, covered by tape, to extend treatment beyond the physician's office.

Studies have shown that patients who are sedated to undergo acupuncture do not have as successful results as those who are conscious during the procedure. At the Jane B. Pettit Comprehensive Pain Management Center at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, most acupuncture patients are 12 or older.

However, a mature 10-year-old began receiving acupuncture treatments at the pain center for chronic abdominal pain that did not respond to surgery or medication and was causing the child to miss school. Initially, he received a one-hour treatment every three weeks. Today, he is pain free and plays hockey regularly. He receives acupuncture once every 10-12 weeks for maintenance.

In addition to abdominal pain, the pain management center has used acupuncture with success in treating ailments such as fibromyalgia (a chronic pain condition affecting muscles and connective tissues), chronic headaches, neck pain from whiplash, knee and hip pain from arthritis, asthma, pain caused by sickle-cell anemia and even shingles (a painful rash caused by a virus).

The pain center is conducting a study in which acupuncture is used to alleviate nausea following tonsillectomy.

## **Boston study of acupuncture and children**

In a study conducted at Children's Hospital in Boston, and published in *Pediatrics* (Volume 105(4) supplement of April 2000), 70% of children who had acupuncture felt the treatment had helped their symptoms. Fifty-nine percent of patients' parents agreed that acupuncture had helped with symptoms. Only one of the 30 children who responded directly to the study's interviewers said the treatment made symptoms worse. Two-thirds of children rated the therapy as pleasant.

For example, one 17-year-old girl, diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, endometriosis and headache, said, "Acupuncture was not painful, and was very relaxing." Another 17-year-old girl, who had endometriosis, said, "It definitely helped the pain. It really works and is not painful, and it brought my energy back." And a 17-year-old boy with pain and nerve problems remarked, "It helped the pain. I tried a lot of treatments. This was the last resort, but the best. I wish I had tried it first."

Almost 80% of study participants were female and almost all were white. Of the 47 initially contacted for the study, 15 children were age 12 or under when treated and 32 were 13-20 years old. The most frequent diagnoses were migraine headaches, endometriosis and reflex sympathetic dystrophy (a chronic syndrome in which pain continues in an area after an injury). The median number of acupuncture treatments (the level at which there were the same number of patients above and below) was eight. Most patients completed treatment within three months.

The study's authors note that children suffering from unrelieved severe, chronic pain may be willing to undergo short-term discomfort to achieve long-term results. The authors admit that study results may be difficult to generalize to a typical pediatric population and suggest that additional studies be conducted to quantify the costs and effectiveness of acupuncture treatment for pediatric pain.

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