



Information for  
patients and  
carers

## Acupuncture Therapy

Helping patients understand what to expect when  
having Acupuncture therapy

## Introduction

Acupuncture is one of the varied treatments offered by the NHS. It is commonly used in hospitals, general practice, physiotherapy departments and pain clinics to compliment conventional medicine. It has been suggested by your practitioner (doctor, physiotherapist or nurse) that acupuncture could be beneficial for your condition. The practitioner treating you will be a qualified doctor, physiotherapist or nurse who has attended a recognised course to train them to perform acupuncture therapy.

## What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a treatment, which may relieve the symptoms of many physical and psychological conditions ranging from allergies and asthma to pain and addiction. Treatment involves inserting fine needles into specific points just under the surface of the skin.

The aim of acupuncture is to help the body to heal and repair itself.

## How does acupuncture work?

Acupuncture is thought to work in several ways.

### **Traditional Chinese Medicine Theory**

The traditional Chinese view is that energy (chi or qi) flows around the body in channels. If there is disease, injury or mechanical problems the energy does not flow freely. Inserting needles into specific points on the body is thought to stimulate this energy, allowing it to flow freely around the body and encourage the body's self-repair mechanism. If the energy is flowing freely then the body is healthy.

## Western Medicine Theory

### The Pain Gate Theory

- Acupuncture stimulates the brain to produce natural pain-relieving chemicals called endorphins
- Acupuncture stimulates the pain pathways of the brain and spinal cord to modify how pain signals are received

### Hormonal Changes

Acupuncture doesn't just relieve pain; it may also have a beneficial effect on health. Paradoxically, patients can notice an increased sense of well-being or drowsiness after treatment. This is due to the release of hormones such as serotonin and melatonin in response to the treatment.

### Discharge Effect Phenomenon

When an area of the body is injured there is an increase of electrical activity in the tissue cells, which reduce the ability of the cells to heal themselves. Acupuncture helps to increase the local circulation to help tissue repair and modify excess electrical activity.

## How will I feel?

Because we are all unique our experiences of treatment will be different. The following is a list of common positive effects that you may notice:

- A lessening of the symptom that you are experiencing, such as pain, muscle spasms and tension. This may not occur immediately but over a number of treatments
- Improved healing process
- Improved sleep patterns
- Feeling more relaxed
- Increased energy levels and general well-being

## Does acupuncture hurt?

This is one of the most commonly asked questions by people considering acupuncture. Most people will recall the sensation of an injection, but thankfully the sensation of acupuncture is quite different!

If the needle is going into a tender area then there can be a slight pain. The most common sensation is that of a dull ache, tingling or a 'tug' or pull'. Some patients describe it as a heaviness/ warm feeling.

## Is acupuncture safe?

Acupuncture is safe when practiced using strict hygiene guidelines. The practitioners at Lancashire Teaching Hospitals Trust all use sterile, disposable needles, therefore minimising the risk of infection.

It is important to inform your treating practitioner if you are:

- Scared of needles
- Allergic to any metals
- On high dose steroid medication
- On blood thinning medication or have a bleeding disorder such as haemophilia
- On immunosuppressant medication or have a condition which would affect your immune system
- Diabetic or hypoglycaemic (get low blood sugars)
- Epileptic or suffer from seizures
- Prone to fainting/dizziness
- Pregnant

Or have:

- Had an adverse reaction to acupuncture in the past
- Lymphoedema / had lymph nodes removed
- Any skin problems in the area to be treated
- Impaired circulation or sensation in the area to be treated

- A blood borne virus
- Cancer

## Are there any side effects?

The following are some potential minor and rarely occurring adverse effects:

- Spot bleeding or a bruise where the needle was inserted (3%)
- Symptoms feeling slightly worse for a short period after treatment (3%). This is usually followed by an improvement in symptoms
- Mild needle site pain (1%). Pain away from needle site (0.5%)
- Allergy or infection (0.2%)
- Nausea (0.3%)
- Headache (0.1%)
- Drowsiness (1%) and dizziness (0.6%) is most common if you have not eaten within two hours of the treatment session. It may not happen after the first session but can be experienced later in the course of treatment.
- Stuck/bent needle (0.1%)

The following are some potentially serious and rarely occurring adverse effects:

- Feeling faint/Fainting/Falls (0.3%)
- Pneumothorax is a very rare complication if needling in the area of the lung (0.0002%/ less than 2 per 1 million). If you develop chest pain, painful or difficult breathing after acupuncture treatment in the chest region, seek immediate medical attention. Other less common adverse events (0.08-0.7%)
- Headache, gastrointestinal or gynaecological issues, peripheral nervous system symptoms, motor symptoms, cardiovascular symptoms, adverse emotional reactions, sleep problems

- If possible it is useful to have a friend or relative accompany you for treatment. If you need to drive home it is important to take care especially if you feel tired. It is not advisable to drive especially after your first treatment until you see how you respond to treatment
- Do not arrange anything stressful immediately afterwards to get the full benefit of the treatment

If you are diabetic please make sure you have something to eat before treatment as occasionally acupuncture can lower your blood sugar.

## Should I tell my doctor?

That is up to you. The treating practitioner will contact your referring doctor usually at the end of the course of treatment to inform him/her of the outcome.

## Can acupuncture work for me?

Research has shown that most people gain pain relief from acupuncture. This is due to the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. Acupuncture does not work for everyone or every condition but good results often occur when other methods have been tried and failed.

The effect of acupuncture can be cumulative, that is pain relief builds up over a number of treatments. Some people respond more quickly than others depending on the condition and the type of response you have to treatment.

Chronic (longstanding) conditions may take longer to respond and may become worse at first but then respond well after the initial phase of discomfort.

Many people feel more relaxed and sleep better following treatment and some people also feel that they have more energy and vitality in addition to having a reduction in their symptoms.

## How many treatments will I need?

Patients treated with acupuncture will require three or four treatments before the practitioner treating you can be sure there is a response. Strong reactions can develop immediately after the first treatment and may even become worse initially. Most patients have a gradual change over several sessions.

Usually we aim to improve your condition in three to six sessions. The person who is treating you will discuss this with you at the first session when you will be asked to sign a consent form agreement to treatment. At each session you will be reassessed and any changes to the treatment plan discussed.

**If you wish to stop treatment please let your practitioner know as soon as possible.**

## Are there any alternative treatments?

Acupuncture is often used in combination with other therapies including drug treatments, physical therapy, self-management etc.

You do not need to have treatment if you do not wish it. As acupuncture can be used for a number of conditions please discuss alternatives with your practitioner.

## Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact your practitioner:

Treating Practitioner: .....

Telephone number: .....

## Sources of further information

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk)

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

[www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)

[www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

The British Medical Acupuncture Society:

[www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk](http://www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk)

Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists:

[www.aacp.org.uk](http://www.aacp.org.uk)

British Acupuncture Council: [www.acupuncture.org.uk](http://www.acupuncture.org.uk)

All our patient information leaflets are available on our website for patients to access and download:

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets)

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Please ask if you would like help in understanding this information. This information can be made available in large print and in other languages.

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