



Asheville Center For Chinese Medicine

70 Woodfin Place Suite West Wing Two 828.258.2777 Asheville, North Carolina
28801 Info@AcupunctureAsheville.com www.AcupunctureAsheville.com

Study Shows Acupuncture Can Treat Chronic Headaches

Patients Say Tiny Needles Helped Relieve Pain

When it comes to treating headaches, acupuncture may one day be as common a remedy as taking aspirin. In fact, the ancient Chinese treatment is gaining respect in the medical community as a therapy for aching heads. In fact, a new study at the University of North Carolina adds to a growing body of clinical research supporting acupuncture's role as a headache therapy.

The study of more than 70 chronic headache sufferers found that those who added a six-week course of acupuncture to their medical treatment reported less pain and better quality of life compared to those who didn't get the therapy. "Adding acupuncture to their treatment clearly improved their situation," said acupuncture researcher Dr. Remy Coeytaux. Coeytaux said that it is not clear from this study, or others, how much of the improvement is a placebo effect, or even how acupuncture eases chronic headache pain. "There is more to the body than chemistry and anatomy and that there is an energy that is coursing through the body," Coeytaux said.

For patients like Charlotte Langford, that energy responds better to tiny needles than to medicine. Tiny needles in Langford's feet have worked wonders for the throbbing pain in her head. "It's a pounding, like somebody has a hammer and they are beating me in the top of my head," she said. Langford has suffered with chronic headaches since she was a child and acupuncture is the only treatment that has helped, she said. "I know that it has saved my life, and it really has," she said.

Researchers note that the acupuncture results could have a major impact on the treatment of chronic headaches, noting that medicine is often not effective for people who suffer with this type of head pain. In some cases, medicine can actually make the headaches worse, which is called the "rebound effect."

It is estimated that 4 to 7 percent of Americans suffer with chronic headaches. Researchers said they plan to conduct a larger study in an effort to measure the possible placebo effect.

Initial Study Details

Results of the study are reported in the October issue of the journal *Headache*, which is published by the American Headache Society. The study's lead author is Coeytaux, an assistant professor in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine's department of family medicine. The International Headache Society criteria for chronic tension-type headache are headaches on 15 or more days a month (180 days per year), for at least six months. Seventy-four patients who were already receiving treatment in the Headache Clinic at UNC Hospitals were recruited to participate in the study. To be eligible for the study, a person had to suffer from headaches at least 15 days a month. However, most participants reported that they had headaches nearly every day.

One group of patients in the study continued to receive standard medical care, while a second group was randomly assigned to receive standard medical care, in addition to a course of 10 acupuncture treatments during a six-week period. The acupuncture treatments were administered by UNC's Dr. Wunian Chen, an instructor in the department of family medicine who was trained in China in the use of traditional Chinese acupuncture. These treatments took place in the General Clinical Research Center at UNC Hospitals



Acupuncture shown to relieve tension headaches

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Acupuncture is an effective treatment for patients suffering from tension headaches, German researchers say. The ancient Chinese therapy that involves inserting very fine needles into the skin at specific sites on the body cut the rates of headaches by nearly half in a study of 270 people. "A significant proportion of patients with tension-type headaches benefited from acupuncture," Dr Wolfgang Weidenhammer, from the Center for Complementary Medicine Research at Technische Universitat in Munich, said. "Acupuncture was well tolerated and improvements lasted several months after completion of treatment," he said.

Dr Weidenhammer and his team compared traditional Chinese acupuncture, minimal acupuncture in which the needles are inserted superficially in the skin and no treatment. The headaches rate in patients given the traditional treatment over eight weeks dropped by almost half. They experience seven fewer days of headaches in the four weeks following treatment. Patients who had minimal acupuncture had a similar result, or 6.6 fewer headache days, while the control group which received no treatment had 1.5 fewer headache days.

"The lack of significant differences between acupuncture and minimal acupuncture in our study indicates that point location and other aspects considered relevant for traditional Chinese acupuncture did not make a major difference," Dr Weidenhammer said in a report *in the British Medical Journal*.

Some patients in the acupuncture group reported side effects which included dizziness and bruising.

Acupuncture, which is one of the most popular complementary treatments, has also been shown to relieve nausea, stress, arthritis pain in the knee and pelvic pain during pregnancy.

Acupuncture Helps Chronic Headache Sufferers-Study

by Patricia Reaney

LONDON (Reuters) - Acupuncture is a useful, cost-effective treatment for patients who suffer from chronic headaches or migraine, American researchers said on Monday.

In one of the largest randomized studies to assess the effectiveness of the ancient Chinese treatment, scientists found it worked better than just conventional treatments alone. "People using acupuncture had fewer headaches, less severe headaches and they used less health resources over the course of the following year," Dr Andrew Vickers, of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, said in an interview. The scientists compared acupuncture plus standard treatment to normal therapy alone in 401 patients in England and Wales who suffered from headaches several days each week. Their research is published online by the British Medical Journal.



Patients who had been assigned acupuncture plus standard treatment received up to 12 treatments over three months. Initially there was not much difference between the two groups but at the end of the year-long trial the scientist noticed a big change. Patients receiving acupuncture had 22 fewer days of headaches per year, used 15 percent less medication, made 25 percent fewer visits to their family doctors and took fewer days off sick than the other group. There were not many side effects and Vickers and his colleagues also found that the treatment was cost effective. "For severely affected patients, acupuncture reduced the severity and the frequency of their headaches to make a real difference in their lives," Vickers said.

Acupuncture was first used in China about 2,000 years ago, according to Vickers. It involves inserting very fine needles into the skin at specific points in the body. It is one of the most popular forms of complementary medicine and has been shown to relieve nausea and pain.

German researchers have also said it could help women undergoing fertility treatment to conceive.

A randomized, controlled trial of acupuncture for chronic daily headache

[Coeytaux RR](#), [Kaufman JS](#), [Kaptchuk TJ](#), [Chen W](#), [Miller WC](#), [Cal Jahan LF](#), [Mann JD](#).

Background.-Approximately 4% of adults experience headaches nearly every day. Nonpharmacologic interventions for frequent headaches may be appropriate because medical management alone is often ineffective.

Objective.-To assess the efficacy of acupuncture as an adjunct to medical management for chronic daily headache (CDH).

Methods.-We conducted a randomized, controlled trial of 74 patients with CDH that compared medical management provided by neurologists to medical management plus 10 acupuncture treatments. Primary outcome measures were daily pain severity and headache-related quality of life (QoL).

Results.-Patients who received only medical management did not demonstrate improvement in any of the standardized measures. Daily pain severity scores trended downward but did not differ between treatment groups ($P = .60$). Relative to medical management only, medical management plus acupuncture was associated with an improvement of 3.0 points (95% CI, 1.0 to 4.9) on the Headache Impact Test and an increase of 8 or more points on the role limitations due to physical problems, social functioning, and general mental health domains of the Short Form 36 Health Survey. Patients who received acupuncture were 3.7 times more likely (CI, 1.7 to 8.1) to report less suffering from headaches at 6 weeks (absolute risk reduction 46%; number needed to treat 2).

Conclusion.-Headache-specialty medical management alone was not associated with improved clinical outcomes among our study population. Supplementing medical management with acupuncture, however, resulted in improvements in health-related QoL and the perception by patients that they suffered less from headaches. (Headache 2005;45:1113-1123).

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