



Does Acupuncture for Arthritis Work?

by ANGELA FINLAY

How, Why, and When Acupuncture May Work for OA Pain

Exercise, diet, and medicine can make a big impact in osteoarthritis (OA) symptoms, but they aren't always enough to relieve pain and restore range of motion. Many patients swear by less conventional methods for more significant improvement.

Acupuncture isn't a new pain management practice, by any means: it's been used for centuries in traditional Chinese medicine, and has more recently found a place in Western medicine, as well.

However, unlike other reputable physical therapies, acupuncture is still a bit mysterious — and unpredictable. Does it hold the solution to chronic pain, or is it an exercise in futility for OA sufferers?

Explaining Acupuncture and Its Pain-Relieving Effects

Traditional definitions and understandings of acupuncture center on the invisible energy field within everybody, known as *qi*. This energy flows down precise pathways (known as meridians); trouble comes when these pathways become blocked or disrupted.

Chinese medicine makes use of acupuncture — the process of inserting very slender needles into the skin at very precise points — to correct this flow of internal energy, and in turn, restore health and return comfort.

A Physiological Explanation

If you're not quite comfortable with the invisible energy pathway theory, you're not alone: Western medical practitioners are suspicious of such an airy explanation, as well. However, they can't ignore the evidence of acupuncture's impact on health, which has been supported by many different studies over many years.

Instead, doctors and researchers offer up an alternative explanation for the pain relief and functional improvement that acupuncture brings to some people.

When a needle is inserted properly, your nervous system will respond with a series of events. Several things can happen in the body to decrease your pain experience:

- **Endorphin release.** The needle triggers a response in the tissue that travels along the spinal cord and up into the brain. This prompts your brain to produce more feel-good endorphins, which are known to reduce your sensation of pain.
- **Surge of cortisol.** A small increase of cortisol can increase your immunity and lower your sensitivity to pain, and a well-placed acupuncture needle can spark a surge of this stress hormone.
- **Muscle relaxation.** By manually touching and “untying” muscle fibers, the needles could lengthen and calm muscles that are in spasm or have been shortened. The effect is longer, more relaxed, and more

flexible muscles.

Is Acupuncture Right for Your Arthritis?

So, acupuncture may be able to offer some pain relief, but how well does it work on the particular pain and stiffness of OA?

Studies have returned mixed results: some have found that patients who receive acupuncture for several weeks were able to move with considerably less pain, while other groups found that acupuncture barely beat out a placebo therapy.

The most recent study that has gained attention was published in *JAMA* in 2014, and the results weren't so promising for OA patients: the study offered little evidence that acupuncture brought any relief to knee OA. Of course, it's only one study in an ongoing body of research, and doctors aren't discounting the therapeutic value of acupuncture just yet.

In the end, there are no guarantees that acupuncture may work for you. Then again, there are some good reasons to try it out:

No Major Side Effects

OA medications like NSAIDs can be useful, but they can also bring along a substantial list of side effects. For those who fret about negative drug reactions, acupuncture may be a better option: as long as you work with a licensed practitioner, the risks of any side effects are slim to none.

Some people experience a bit of bruising at the needle site, but that will clear up in a matter of a few days. Since there are no drugs involved, there's also no risk of addiction.

OA in the Knee Can Respond Better

If you have osteoarthritis of the knee (as is the case with so many OA patients), evidence suggests you stand a better chance of seeing results from a series of acupuncture sessions than if your OA affected other areas. One 2015 study showed that patients with knee OA saw their pain, stiffness, and inflammation decrease, while their function increased, after electro-acupuncture treatments.

Health Insurance Often Covers Acupuncture

Before you decide for or against acupuncture for arthritis, look into your health insurance plan. Many U.S. insurers provide some coverage for acupuncture — you might be able to try it for little to no cost.

However, Medicare and Medicaid do not cover the costs. If you're not insured but still want to give it a go, expect to pay between \$75 and \$200 a session — and you'll likely need multiple sessions before you see any results.

If you and your doctor decide that acupuncture might be right for you, familiarize yourself with the procedure before you attend your first session. The idea of several needles sticking into your skin can be alarming, but rest assured there is hardly any discomfort involved.

If you undergo electro-acupuncture (when the needles are electrically energized once they're in position), you might feel a tingling sensation. The more you know what to expect, the better you can relax — and that will work in your favor.

Respect the Limits of Acupuncture Therapy

It can be tempting to replace invasive or pharmaceutical solutions with a milder yet promising therapy, but beware the limits of acupuncture.

Though research is ongoing, there haven't been many studies that offer concrete evidence of the universal benefits of acupuncture, so it's best not to count on it entirely. Instead, only use it in conjunction with other well-tested treatments for arthritis.