

NEWS [HEALTH NEWS](#)

Can Acupuncture Treat Your Pain?

By [Alyssa Hui](#) Published on March 24, 2023

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Pain management techniques run the gamut, ranging from physical therapy and medications to cold therapies and massages. One particular method that is growing in popularity is acupuncture.¹

According to a 2021 report by the World Health Organization (WHO), acupuncture is the most commonly

used form of traditional medicine practice globally,¹ and it's gaining more attention in the United States. In fact, more than 10 million acupuncture treatments are administered annually in the U.S. alone.²

In this article, we'll cover how acupuncture works, what conditions it can help with, and how you can find a qualified acupuncturist for your needs.

What Is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a medical practice that involves placing solid but very thin needles at specific points in the body to treat certain health problems, [Gudrun Snyder, DAc, MSAc, LAc](#), Doctor of East Asian Acupuncture and founder of [Moon Rabbit Acupuncture](#), told Verywell.

"The needles are 30 times thinner than the traditional needle you experience at your physician's office," she said, adding that they can be used manually or stimulated with small electric currents, called electroacupuncture.

[How Electroacupuncture Helped Me Get My Period Back](#)

Acupuncture originated in China about 3,000 years ago and is also known as an ancient practice of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Its use was first recorded in the ancient Chinese medical text *Huang Di Nei Jing*, or The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine.²

Over the next few hundred years, TCM spread to Japan and other areas of Asia. In more recent years, the practice has boomed in acceptance and demand across the world, Snyder said.²

How Does Acupuncture Work?

From an Eastern perspective, acupuncture works by balancing the flow of qi (chi), also known as energy, which moves through meridians, or channels in your body.

“By inserting needles into specific points along these meridians, acupuncture re-establishes balance for overall health and wellbeing,” she said.

When qi is imbalanced due to internal and external stressors such as diet, emotional upset, overwork, or even the weather, people can become ill, [Stace Nelson-Hicks, DACM](#), Doctor of Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine and a licensed acupuncturist in California, told Verywell in an email.

[Acupressure Uses and Benefits](#)

She explains that by using ancient diagnostic techniques and comprehensive interviews, practitioners can determine which organ systems and meridians need to be addressed, and target acupuncture points accordingly.

TCM practitioners believe there are more than 2,000 acupoints in the body.³

“Each point has its own function: some increase energy, others decrease it, thereby helping balance our patients to support recovery,” Nelson-Hicks said.

The Western perspective goes beyond energy healing, suggesting that acupuncture alleviates pain by stimulating nerves, muscles, and fascia (connective tissue), along with regulating immune response, nervous system response, lymph flow, and increasing muscle relaxation, Snyder said.

[Can Acupuncture Help Arthritis Pain?](#)

Different Types of Acupuncture

Multiple lineages, training, styles, and types of acupuncture have been modified and developed across the world, but all traditions involve needling into certain points, Nelson-Hicks said. Different types of acupuncture include:

- **Orthopedic Acupuncture (Dry Needling)** combines TCM and structure manipulation to treat pain, tissue injuries, imbalances in the body, and other general systemic disorders.

- **Five Element Style** is a spiritual and emotional technique that uses the five elements of nature—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—to transfer energy from one element to another creating balance in the body.
- **Japanese Style Acupuncture** uses similar techniques to TCM but uses a more subtle approach, such as using fewer needles or inserting them at lower depths in the body.
- **Korean Acupuncture** uses both techniques from Chinese and Japanese acupuncture. But practitioners may use more needles and different kinds of needles, like a copper variety instead of the standard stainless steel type. This type of acupuncture uses only acupoints on the hand to treat different areas of the body.
- **Auricular Acupuncture** is similar to Korean acupuncture, but relies on certain points in the ear to treat other areas of the body. The goal is to overcome imbalances and disharmonies.
- **Distal Acupuncture** is a technique that treats pain indirectly. Practitioners place needles in spots other than the area of discomfort. For example, practitioners may place needles around the elbows for knee pain or the lower legs for shoulder pain.
- **Acupressure** is a form of therapy that stimulates different acupoints without using needles. Practitioners use precise finger placements, their hands, or other tools like tuning forks and essential

oils to apply pressure over specific points to enhance the flow of energy.

Snyder said providers can combine and use various forms of acupuncture based on a patient's personal needs.

What Conditions Can Acupuncture Treat?

While more research is needed regarding acupuncture and the specific conditions it can aid, the most common conditions seen in modern clinics include pain, fertility, anxiety, depression, allergies, and cancer support, [Tom Ingegno, DACM, MSOM, LAc](#), an acupuncturist at Charm City Integrative Health based in Baltimore, told Verywell.

“The nature of acupuncture makes it ideal for treating most conditions that are not life-threatening and a good ancillary therapy for both chronic and terminal conditions to improve quality of life,” he said. “While acupuncture is an amazing therapy, people often look for it when no other therapy has helped.”

Nelson-Hicks added menopause, PMS, digestive complaints, nausea, migraines, autoimmune conditions, recovery from chemotherapy, emotional distress, upper respiratory infections, and urinary tract infections are other conditions that respond well to TCM.

[Natural Remedies for Menopause Mood Swings and Hot Flashes](#)

One 2022 analysis published in the BMJ that analyzed more than 2,000 scientific reviews of acupuncture therapies found acupuncture to be effective for post-stroke aphasia, neck, shoulder, and muscle pain, fibromyalgia pain, lactation issues after delivery, lower back pain, vascular dementia symptom, and allergy symptoms.⁴

Additionally, a mouse study led by neuroscientists at Harvard Medical School suggests that electroacupuncture can calm inflammation.⁵

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health notes that acupuncture may be helpful for:⁶

- Back and neck pain
- Osteoarthritis
- Headache (including migraine)
- Myofascial pain syndrome
- Sciatica
- Postoperative pain
- Cancer pain
- Chronic prostatitis

- Chronic pelvic pain syndrome
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Fibromyalgia
- Seasonal allergies
- Urinary incontinence
- Treatment-related nausea and vomiting in cancer patients
- Asthma
- Depression
- Quitting smoking
- Infertility
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Menopausal hot flashes

Beyond helping with pain and symptoms of health conditions, acupuncture can improve sleep, digestion, and stress, Ingegno said.

Is Acupuncture Safe?

When acupuncture is given by a highly trained, licensed, and certified acupuncturist, it is extremely safe, Nelson-Hicks said.

“We have some of the lowest medical malpractice rates of all providers because of TCM’s safety rating,” she added.

An analysis published in 2021—which included 21 studies and almost 13 million treatments—estimated the overall risk of serious adverse events at about 8 per million treatments. The most common serious adverse events were pneumothorax (collapsed lung), cardiovascular problems, and fainting (which in some cases caused trauma, such as fractures).⁷

Snyder noted there are some short-term risks associated with acupuncture, such as:

- Pain, bleeding, or bruising where the needle punctures the skin
- Dizziness if you have not eaten or are needle-averse
- Drowsiness

While there are some serious side effects associated with acupuncture, like a punctured lung or infection, these are very rare.

If you have a metal allergy, infection, or open wound in the area to be needled, Snyder said it’s best to avoid acupuncture. People who have a bleeding disorder, are taking any medicines such as an anticoagulant, or are

pregnant, should talk to their acupuncturist before starting a session.

[The Benefits and Side Effects of Acupuncture](#)

How to Find a Qualified Acupuncturist

If you decide to see an acupuncturist, find a practitioner who is board-certified, licensed, and has the proper training and credentials, Ingegno said.

You can check to see if a practitioner is certified in your state by visiting the [National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine](#) (NCCAOM) website.

“Many will be nationally certified through the NCCAOM. Some may even specialize in the condition for which you are seeking treatment,” Ingegno said. “Read their bios, and make sure it’s a good fit for you.”

While the NCCAOM is the most centralized source to check a provider's accreditation, participation is voluntary, so not all acupuncturists will be listed there. If you are unable to find the acupuncturist you wish to see, you can call the NCCAOM at 202-381-11140 to try and learn more.

“These accredited associations guarantee that your practitioner has studied Eastern and Western medicine and has completed a supervised internship needing hundreds of patients over hundreds of hours,” Nelson-Hicks said. “My advice is to always receive acupuncture from a licensed, certified acupuncturist who specializes in your particular need.”

What to Expect During an Acupuncture Visit

While everyone’s visit will be tailored to their specific needs, Snyder said, in general, your first visit will likely last an hour or two. Your initial evaluation will require you to fill out a full medical/health history form and questionnaire. You’ll also spend a few minutes discussing your concerns and health goals with an acupuncturist.

In most cases, patients will be asked to change into a gown or to lay under sheets on the acupuncture table so the practitioner can access their limbs, back, and abdomen without having to move their clothing aside, Nelson-Hicks said.

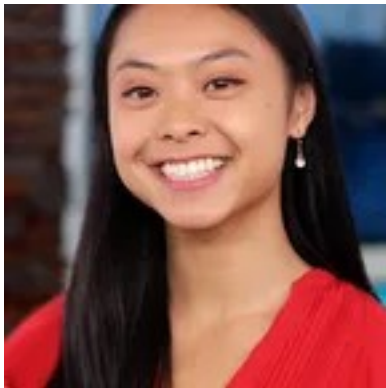
After needles are inserted, they’ll need to stay in place for about 20 to 30 minutes. During this time, you can relax, meditate, sleep, and listen to music or a podcast.

Your practitioner may monitor if and how your pulses have changed and may add or remove needles as they

see fit. They may also use other methods like cupping, gua sha, or herbal medicine. After the needles are removed, your practitioner will determine your course of treatment.

“Sometimes one is all you need, and oftentimes, depending on how chronic or severe [your condition is], they may suggest several treatments over the course of several weeks,” Nelson-Hicks said.

7 Sources



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