

# Acupuncture found to beat “usual” care for back pain

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Three types of acupuncture therapy—including one described as only “simulated” acupuncture—appeared more effective than usual care for chronic low back pain in a new study, researchers report.



The study appears in the May 11 issue of the research journal Archives of Internal Medicine.

Back pain costs Americans at least \$37 billion annually, according to the researchers. Many patients with this condition are unsatisfied with traditional medical care and seek help from complementary and alternative care providers, including acupuncturists.

“Back pain is the leading reason for visits to licensed acupuncturists, and medical acupuncturists consider acupuncture an effective treatment for back pain,” the authors write.

Curiously, several recent studies have suggested that simulated acupuncture, or shallow needling on parts of the body not considered key acupuncture points, appear as effective as acupuncture involving penetrating the skin.

Normal acupuncture is a traditional Chinese technique involving inserting thin needles into the skin at selected points to treat various ailments. Practitioners say this procedure helps bring the body’s energy into balance. Western scientists tend to be skeptical of such ideas. Nonetheless, some studies have indicated that for whatever reason, acupuncture is helpful for some conditions.

The new study included an individually tailored acupuncture program, standard acupuncture therapy and a simulation involving toothpicks at key acupuncture points

The researchers, Daniel C. Cherkin of Group Health Center for Health Studies, Seattle, and colleagues, compared four different types of treatment in a randomized clinical trial involving 638 adults of average age 47. All had chronic low back pain and underwent a seven-week treatment.

During the seven-week treatment period, 157 participants received 10 acupuncture treatments in a manner individually prescribed by a diagnostic acupuncturist; 158 underwent a standardized course of acupuncture treatments considered effective by experts for low back pain; 162 received 10 sessions of simulated acupuncture, in which practitioners used a toothpick inside of an acupuncture needle guide tube to mimic the insertion, stimulation and removal of needles; and 161 received usual care.

Participants reported changes in their symptoms and in the amount of dysfunction caused by their back pain by phone after eight, 26 and 52 weeks.

“Compared with usual care, individualized acupuncture, standardized acupuncture and simulated acupuncture had beneficial and persisting effects on chronic back pain,” the authors write. At the eight-week follow-up, 60 percent of the participants receiving any type of acupuncture experienced a clinically meaningful improvement, compared with 39 percent of those receiving usual care, the study found. At the one-year follow-up, 59 percent to 65 percent of those in the acupuncture groups reported an improvement in function compared with 50 percent in the “usual care” group.

There are several possible explanations for the effectiveness of simulated acupuncture, the authors noted. Superficial stimulation of acupuncture points may directly stimulate physiological processes that result in reduced pain and improved function. Alternatively, the improvement may be due to another aspect of the treatment experience, such as interaction with the therapist or a belief that acupuncture will be helpful.

“These findings raise questions about acupuncture’s purported mechanisms of action,” they write. “It remains unclear whether acupuncture or our simulated method of acupuncture provide physiologically important stimulation or represent placebo or non-specific effects.”