
Acupuncture Eases Headache Pain, Study Shows

(29 Jul, 2005) - Contributed by Rita Jenkins

The ancient Chinese practice of acupuncture has proven to be an effective treatment for tension headache. It not only relieves pain, but also cuts rates of recurrence by almost half, indicates research published in the August 2005 issue of BMJ.

Traditional Chinese acupuncture therapy involves insertion of needles up to 3 inches deep into the body at prescribed acupuncture points, according to licensed acupuncturist Rong Zeng of the New York Good Health Clinic in Manhattan.

However, a new, randomized blind study in Germany involving 270 patients with a similar severity of tension headache has shown that a minimal course of acupuncture works almost as well as the traditional method.

Fewer Headaches After Treatment

Researchers divided the patients into three groups. Over an eight-week period, one group was treated with traditional acupuncture, another received minimal acupuncture (needles inserted only superficially into the skin at non-acupuncture points), and the control group had neither treatment.

The subjects were monitored for four weeks after their period of treatment. Those who had received traditional acupuncture care subsequently experienced seven fewer headaches. The group that had been given minimal acupuncture therapy had surprisingly similar results -- 6.6 fewer headaches.

The control group did not fare as well, with only 1.5 fewer headaches.

Improvements in headache rates continued for months after the acupuncture treatment, though they began to rise slightly as time went on.

Results Subject to Interpretation

Such a negligible difference in results between traditional and minimal acupuncture treatments possibly indicates that the location of acupuncture points and depth of needle insertion do not make a major difference for treatment of tension headache, the authors of the study suggest.

However, they caution that the possibility of placebo effects should not be overlooked.

"Placebo effect is a factor in all types of medicine," Dr. Zeng noted. In western medicine, for example, blind tests may reveal placebo effects that are similar to responses to trial drugs, she explained.

In any case, it is clear that the patients who received acupuncture treatment experienced fewer headaches. The possibility that placebo effect plays a role in acupuncture does not detract

from its efficacy.