

Treating Back Pain With Acupuncture

If you suffer from low back pain, have you considered acupuncture? Learn how this procedure may be able to relieve your pain.

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You lifted too much, overdid it on the tennis court, sat slouched too long at the office desk. Bed rest and heat, you've tried. If you still don't have relief, maybe it's time to see a doctor.

Low back pain is one of the most frequent reasons people see a doctor or miss work. Most back pain disappears on its own in a week to 10 days. But whether the pain lasts a short while or is chronic, you'll want to find out if it's something serious, and you'll want relief.

Most low back pain, whether acute or chronic, can often be treated without surgery. No one treatment is a miracle cure, so relief is often found through a combination of therapies. Pain relievers or anti-inflammatory medicines can help control pain and discomfort. Medication might have side effects, though, and it may not be for everyone.

Other things that may also help are:

- Exercise
- Physical therapy
- Spinal manipulation or osteopathic manipulative therapy
- Chiropractic treatment
- Acupuncture

What about acupuncture?

As alternative medicine becomes more popular, many people are turning to acupuncture for pain relief. This is a centuries-old Chinese healing technique that involves stimulating points on the body with thin needles. Acupuncture needles are sterile, disposable and thinner than a pin. The procedure is safe and painless if it's done properly. According to the Food and Drug Administration, few complications have been reported with acupuncture.

Several theories exist about why acupuncture might work. From the Chinese perspective, back pain is an obstruction of "chi," or the body's own internal energy. Those who practice this ancient therapy believe that it regulates the flow of this chi.

From a more Western viewpoint, the tiny acupuncture needles, which are placed at different points in the body, may stimulate the production of endorphins, the body's own natural pain-relieving chemicals.

Putting an acupuncture needle into a muscle that is contracted may help the muscle relax. Another theory about how it works for back pain is that it stimulates nerves in the legs and thighs. This may decrease inflammation of the nerves in the lower back that are causing pain.

Documenting acupuncture's success

The effectiveness of acupuncture to treat back pain is unclear. A large review of medical literature done in 2010 concluded that acupuncture may be effective for short-term relief of chronic low back pain. It is not clear whether acupuncture is helpful for acute low back pain.

Ask your doctor if acupuncture can help your low back pain. He or she may be able to recommend an acupuncturist in your area. Some conventional medical doctors are also trained in acupuncture. Make sure you choose a practitioner who is licensed in your state to practice acupuncture.

SOURCES:

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- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Complementary and alternative therapies for back pain II. AHRQ publication no. 10(11)-E007. October 2010.
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