

# Understanding Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a traditional medicine that's been practiced in China and other Asian countries for thousands of years. Its proponents say it can do everything from relieving pain to bringing a general sense of wellness. Others think the only benefits you get from acupuncture are in your head. Recent studies have found that both sides may have a point. Acupuncture can be effective for certain health problems, such as some types

of chronic pain. But how it works is something of a mystery.

## Pinpointing Acupuncture

Acupuncture is the stimulation of specific points on the body. The methods can vary, but the most well-known type in the United States is the insertion of thin metal needles through the skin. At least 3 million adults nationwide use

acupuncture every year, according to the latest estimates.

Acupuncture is part of a family of procedures that originated in China. According to traditional Chinese medicine, the body contains a delicate balance of two opposing and inseparable forces: yin and yang. Yin represents the cold, slow or passive principle. Yang represents the hot, excited or active principle. Health is achieved through balancing the 2. Disease comes from an imbalance that leads to a blockage in the flow of qi—the vital energy or life force thought to regulate your spiritual, emotional, mental and physical health. Acupuncture is intended to remove blockages in the flow of qi and restore and maintain health.

## The benefits of acupuncture are:

- When performed correctly it is safe
- There are very few side effects
- It is effective in controlling some types of pain
- It may be considered for patients who do not respond to pain medications
- It is a useful alternative for patients who do not want to take pain medications

## The risks of acupuncture are:

- It is dangerous if the patient has a bleeding disorder
- It is dangerous if the patient is taking blood thinners
- There may be bleeding, bruising and soreness at the insertion sites
- The needle may break and damage an internal organ (very rare)
- Unsterilized needles may infect the patient
- When inserted deeply into the chest or upper back there is a risk of collapsed lung (very rare)

## Putting Acupuncture to the Test

Researchers don't know how these ideas translate to our Western understanding of medicine, but the fact is that many well-designed studies have found that acupuncture can help with certain conditions, such as back pain, knee pain, headaches and osteoarthritis.

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Well-designed clinical trials need control groups—people who get a sham or simulated treatment called a placebo. Placebos might come in the form of a sugar pill or a saline injection. They give researchers something to compare the real treatment with. But designing a placebo for acupuncture is a challenge.

“I don’t really think you can come up with a great placebo needling,” says Dr. Karen J. Sherman, an acupuncture researcher at Group Health Research Institute in Seattle.

For example, when researchers have compared inserting needles with just pressing a toothpick onto acupuncture points, they’ve often found both treatments to be successful. But Sherman questions whether these are really controls. Many traditional acupuncturists would consider them true treatments, too. The important thing, in their view, is to hit the right spot, not necessarily how deep you go.

Another option for a placebo would be to test a different location. But Sherman says that would be inappropriate for treating pain because acupuncturists traditionally needle tender points. “To me, there’s no place on the back, if you have back pain, where you can say you have a great control,” Sherman says, “so I don’t think that’s a really solid idea.”

### Should You Try It?

Should you try acupuncture? Studies have found it to be very safe, with few side effects. If you’re thinking about it, talk to your doctor. Talk to your health care professional about your specific situation and then see if it’s something you can live with because it might not be the right treatment for you.

If you do decide to try acupuncture, give it some time. You can’t expect one session will tell you whether it works or not. Be open-minded and willing to at least entertain some of the notions that the acupuncturist brings up. Give it a try if you’re open to it.

### If You Want To Try Acupuncture

- Talk to your health care provider about it, especially if you’re pregnant or nursing, or are thinking of using acupuncture to treat a child.
- Find an acupuncturist who’s experienced working with your problem.
- Check credentials. Most states require a license to practice acupuncture.
- Don’t use acupuncture as a replacement for conventional care.
- Don’t rely on a diagnosis of disease by an acupuncturist who doesn’t have conventional medical training.
- To help ensure coordinated and safe care, tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use.

