

Acupuncture and Low Back Pain

Analysis Finds Therapy Effective for Chronic Pain; Quality of Trials Is Limited

By Editorial Staff

According to the National Institutes of Health, up to 80 percent of the general population in the United States will suffer an episode of low back pain during their lifetimes.¹ After respiratory ailments, low back pain is the most frequent reason Americans visit a medical doctor for treatment.

It is also, according to a widely publicized 2002 study, the most frequent reason that Americans visit a licensed acupuncturist for care.²

A new meta-analysis of acupuncture and the treatment of low back pain has recently been published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.³ The review of approximately two dozen previously published studies has found that acupuncture is "significantly more effective" than sham acupuncture or no treatment in people with chronic back pain. However, the meta-analysis also questions the overall effectiveness of acupuncture compared to other traditional forms of care, and its ability to treat acute back pain remains uncertain because the number of studies available for review is, in the opinion of the analysts, "limited in quantity and quality."

In their analysis, a team of scientists from the United States and Great Britain conducted a search of seven computerized databases in the U.S. and Europe from their inception through August 2004. (One database was searched through February 2003). They also contacted experts in various countries, including the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, and Japan, for randomized, controlled trials that compared needle acupuncture with sham acupuncture, no treatment, or other active therapies on patients with low back pain. The search produced 33 trials that met the investigators' criteria, including 23 recent trials that had not been included in previous analyses.

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