

Pediatric Pain and Acupuncture

Year-Long Study Shows Children Benefit From Treatment

By Michael Devitt

Although acupuncture has proven to be effective in treating pain in adults, it is not always considered a first option for relieving pain in children and adolescents.

There are several reasons for this train of thought, the chief of which is that since most children are afraid of needles, they would be unwilling to undergo a form of care that involves needling.

Recent research has proven this isn't necessarily the case, however. An April 2000 study in the journal *Pediatrics*, for example, found that 70 percent of children treated with acupuncture felt it helped their symptoms, and two-thirds found the treatment "pleasant." Fifty-nine percent of the parents agreed that acupuncture helped their children.¹

The latest example of acupuncture's ability to treat pain in children and adolescents was presented at the 55th annual meeting of the American Society of Anesthesiologists in Orlando, Fla.² At the meeting, researchers from Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston, Mass., published the results of the Pediatric Medical Acupuncture Service, a pain and symptom management program established in October 2000.

Over a one-year period, 243 children (167 females, 76 males; mean age 14.3 years) were treated with acupuncture. Patients received acupuncture treatment for six weeks, with an average of 8.4 sessions per six-week period. Different acupoints were used depending on the area of the body being treated.

At the first visit, the patients were questioned about their chief area of pain. Most children reported having pain in the lower back, hips and lower extremities (30 percent), abdomen (25 percent) or head (23 percent).

At the start of the study, and during each subsequent visit, children also reported the severity of their pain on

a visual analogue scale of 0 to 10 (10 being worst), with the score reported to a researcher other than the acupuncturist delivering care.

Pain scores decreased significantly as the children were treated. At the initial consultation, the mean visual analogue score was 8.3. By the end of the six-week treatment period, however, the mean pain scores were reduced an average of 5 points per patient to 3.3.

Although pain relief was the focus of the study, acupuncture appeared to provide supplemental benefits as well. The researchers noted that in addition to reduced pain levels, the children experienced "overall improvement of well-being" while being treated. Patients also reported increased attendance at school and improved sleep patterns, and they were able to take part in more extracurricular activities. No side-effects or complications related to treatment were reported.

"Our experience strongly suggests that acupuncture can be safely and successfully incorporated into pediatric pain management practice," said Dr. Yuan-Chi Lin, the lead researcher at the program, in an interview with Doctors Group News.³

The only drawback the researchers noted to treating children with acupuncture appeared to be a fear of needles. In a separate interview with the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Dr. Lin found that most fears were overcome through communication and positive reinforcement, along with acupuncture's ability to successfully treat pain quickly.

"Our experience indicates that through careful explanation and demonstration, children are not afraid of acupuncture and can tolerate treatments very well with minimal discomfort," Lin said. "When they experience the effects of the acupuncture treatments, patients' and families' responses to them are very positive."⁴

References

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