

FAQs on Acupuncture for Back, Neck and Joint Pain

How is acupuncture effective for treating my joint pain?

Since it is known that long-term use of many pain medications can have deleterious effects on the gastro-intestinal and other organ systems, it is good to know that acupuncture is a particularly effective therapy for treating pain of musculoskeletal and neuropathic origin, including arthritis.

When a needle is inserted into the body, it promotes pain-killing and healing processes at several levels. By stimulating sensory nerves, acupuncture sends signals to the spinal cord and brain to release pain-killing neuropeptides such as endorphins and enkephalins. In addition, acupuncture activates the humoral (blood) system to increase local blood circulation, stimulate immune function and promote an anti-inflammatory and tissue healing response.

Acupuncture can help relax chronic muscle spasms by calming the sympathetic nervous system, which is the part of the nervous system that is responsible for the stress response. Chronic stress is responsible for muscle tightness especially in the back, neck and shoulders. This can lead to degenerative joint problems in the vertebral discs, cartilage and bones. Chronic stress also affects bone metabolism, and can accelerate the formation of abnormal bone spurs, called osteophytes.

Because of its systemic effects in promoting physiologic homeostasis and calming the stress response, acupuncture not only treats the flare-ups of joint pain, but can help to prevent re-occurrences through regular maintenance treatments. It will also help to slow the degenerative processes that eventually manifest as arthritic pain and dysfunction.

What about Chinese herbs?

You may be asked to take an herbal formula concurrently with your acupuncture treatments. Herbal formulas are appropriate when it is determined that part of your complaint is due to a deficiency of nutritive substances your body needs for proper functioning. There may also be a metabolic insufficiency such that your body has difficulty repairing damaged tissue, mounting an anti-inflammatory response or mediating release of your body's natural pain-killers. In essence, herbal formulas add something that your body needs while acupuncture helps to utilize more efficiently what is already there.

What types of joint pain can acupuncture treat?

Acupuncture is effective therapy for both degenerative and inflammatory joint pain, as well as pain, numbness or tingling of muscular or neuropathic origin. Examples of joint and soft tissue conditions amenable to acupuncture therapy are frozen shoulder, TMJ disorder, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, sacro-iliac strain, facet syndrome, disc herniations, degenerative disc dis-

ease, bursitis, tendonitis, traumatic sprains, and repetitive strain injuries. Acupuncture can also treat post-operative pain and accelerate healing.

How many treatments will it take before I start feeling better?

Acupuncture can promote the healing processes in your body like few other therapies can. However, it is not magic and does not work instantaneously. The course of therapy will depend upon how long your complaint has persisted, its severity, complicating factors such as previous surgeries, and most importantly, your own body's capacity to heal itself. For most arthritic complaints of moderate severity in a person with relatively good health, you should see progress within 6-8 treatments, with the total course of therapy being 12-24 treatments. At the beginning, you will be asked to come in 2-3 times a week for 2-4 weeks, and the frequency will decrease as your complaint improves. You may also be given recommendations for herbal therapy, movement and stretching, and lifestyle modifications. It is important to emphasize that your progress depends upon following your course of therapy and the advice of your acupuncturist.

I don't like needles! Will acupuncture hurt?

Many people imagine that acupuncture will be painful because of their previous experiences with immunizations. Hypodermic needles used for immunizations and blood draws have a hollow center and are many times thicker than an acupuncture needle, which is as thin as a strand of hair. In fact, several acupuncture needles can actually be inserted into the hollow tube of a hypodermic needle. People often do not feel anything at all, or else only a momentary prick when an acupuncture needle is inserted. In addition, we use only single-use, pre-sterilized needles, so there is virtually no risk of infection.

Will my insurance pay for acupuncture treatments?

Due to strong consumer demand, more insurance plans are offering acupuncture benefits every year. It is important to check with your individual health plan beforehand to determine whether you have benefits. Many PPO plans offer some acupuncture benefits. Most HMOs still do not cover acupuncture, although that too is changing. Medicare presently does not cover acupuncture, but some Medicare supplement plans do. We offer discounted services of 25% or more for patients who must pay out-of-pocket.



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