

Q.: I suffer from chronic arthritis. I've tried OTC and prescription meds, as well as other conventional treatments to relieve the pain and discomfort. I read that acupuncture is sometimes an option for people with arthritis, but I am not sure if it would help in my situation. How is acupuncture used to treat arthritis? What are the risks? Is it always effective?

A.: What a timely question. In the wake of the Vioxx, Bextra, and Celebrex controversies, many people are seeking a safe and effective way to manage or prevent arthritis pain without the dangerous, even fatal potential side effects of formerly trusted medications. Fortunately, there are good options. Acupuncture is one of them.

First, realize that arthritis management and prevention are more your responsibility than any doctor's or pill's. Lifestyle choices-- especially sensible, regular exercise -- make a tremendous difference in arthritis management and prevention. Wear-and-tear or "osteo" arthritis is essentially human joint rust, and after enough "miles" our "vehicles" eventually get a bit creaky. Add a nervous system to rusty hinges in the knees, hips, feet, spine, hands, and shoulders, and you've got a recipe for aches and pain.

So, how does acupuncture help? To see how acupuncture works, let's remember the last time you banged your elbow. What did you instinctively do? I'm guessing you rubbed your elbow, and it immediately felt a bit better. Eastern explanations of acupuncture would say you're "moving Chi," and that pain is a stagnation of that "Chi" or energy. Western explanations would say that you're stimulating Type IIA nerves, overriding slower conducting nerves specific to pain impulses... but the bottom line is that when you stimulate an area, you can at least temporarily override pain.

Acupuncture is more than just turning off pain. It affects blood chemistry, local nerve function, and brain function. Rather than just generally rubbing an area, acupuncture (acupressure or electroacupuncture for the shy) uses tiny, generally painless needles the size of a human hair. That lets the acupuncturist be VERY specific. Acupuncture takes the "rubbing your elbow" effect to the nth degree, very precisely stimulating points that have been shown to modify the sensation of pain, affect blood flow, change blood chemistry, and facilitate healing. It's also remarkably calming, counter-intuitive as that may sound.

Acupuncture isn't a one-visit wonder. Nothing is. Anyone who promises you a miracle cure, whether they be selling a pill, a surgery, a chiropractic adjustment, or a needle, is someone you should run from (or walk fast, if your knees hurt). Even the best drugs for pain have to be taken again and again, and the media is finally counter-balancing the "everything is safe and wonderful" images on the TV drug commercials. The advantage of acupuncture is that the risks are minimal, and the potential for benefit tremendous. Acupuncture needles are FDA-approved, single-use, HAZMAT-disposed devices. The worst complication I've seen is a tiny bruise; and most people feel nothing, warmth, or heaviness during the procedure. Recent studies show that acupuncture is very effective for many forms of knee pain, and I've used it on most sites of the human body. It's not a one-visit miracle; but given some time to work, it can do a LOT of good for arthritis

sufferers. For a treatment that's safe, with the worst likely outcome being no improvement rather than the more serious side effects of OTC and prescription pain medications, many patients have found they have little to lose by trying acupuncture... and everything to gain.

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