

Information on acupuncture



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

Acupuncture therapy consists of very thin needles inserted through the skin at various points on the body to stimulate "energy flow". People who have had acupuncture report that it is enjoyable, relaxing and beneficial to some symptoms and overall quality of life. There is good evidence that it is effective in treating chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting. There is however no good evidence that acupuncture is effective as a treatment to cure cancer. There is also some evidence that it may be useful in helping ease pain and other cancer related symptoms, however, more research needs to be conducted. Acupuncture is considered safe when practiced by a fully qualified professional therapist.

Practitioner Perspective

"At Penny Brohn Cancer Care we use acupuncture to help restore harmony to clients, and seek to address energetic imbalances. This may involve helping people come to terms with the emotional issues around having cancer, such as anger, worry or fear. It may also involve treatment of side effects from chemotherapy, radiotherapy or surgery, such as nausea, insomnia, fatigue, lowered immune function, or liver and kidney impairment."

More information: What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a popular Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) intervention. Very thin needles are inserted into the skin at specific locations on the body to help the "flow of energy" known as qi (chi) along pathways within the body described as "meridians". Specific locations along the meridian pathways are known as acupressure points or acupoints.

Historically, different countries have developed their own style of acupuncture e.g. French, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and "western medical acupuncture". Some styles of acupuncture concentrate on particular body parts e.g. ear, scalp, face, foot or hand. Cross cultural exchange of Western and Chinese medical knowledge and techniques are evident in both modern and traditional practices.

Traditional Chinese Medicine includes other therapies such as:

- Moxibustion where burning herbs are placed above the skin at acupoints
- Acupressure when fingers are used to apply pressure to acupoints
- Cupping where heated glass cups are used on the skin to create a vacuum at acupoints
- Herbal medicine, diet and exercise

Modern forms of acupuncture related techniques include:

- Sonopuncture, using sound waves via specialised tuning forks
- Electroacupuncture using electricity with or without needles
- Chromopuncture using coloured light instead of needles
- Laser acupuncture

What happens in an acupuncture session?

During an acupuncture session the therapist will take information about your medical history, medication, diet, and sleep routine. Traditional Chinese Medicine acupuncturists may also look at your tongue and take your pulse to help them decide which meridians to work on and where to place the needles.

In traditional acupuncture very thin needles are inserted at acupoints. The needles are left in place for 15-30 minutes and may be gently twirled, heated or manipulated according to the type of therapy being practiced. Acupuncture itself should cause virtually no pain if performed correctly and by a skilled therapist. However, a sensation known as "de qi" may be felt. This can feel like heaviness, tightness or numbness. Therapists often view this sensation as an important part of the therapy.

Initial acupuncture therapy sessions may take up to one-and-a-half hours, though subsequent sessions may be shorter. For a person with cancer, the acupuncturist will suggest a treatment plan where clients come for sessions lasting up to an hour usually every week to help with any chronic problems e.g. hot flushes, nausea etc.

What are the providers' claims?

Traditional acupuncture is offered to relieve disease symptoms by re-establishing the normal flow of qi through the body's network of meridians. There are thought to be 12 meridians in the body which relate to the 12 major organs of the body. Meridians are thought to lie in a continuous path through the body and along these over 350 acupuncture points are marked out.

Acupuncture is offered to help manage side effects and symptoms of cancer and its treatments. This includes relief from chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, cancer pain, immune system function, hot flushes, breathlessness, fatigue, dry mouth, weight loss, cough, anxiety and depression¹. For chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting the most useful acupuncture point is thought to be Pericardium 6 (P6, or the Neiguan point), which is found near the wrist. The point can be stimulated with needles or by wearing an acupressure wristband with a raised plastic button to generate pressure at the P6 point.

What do people who have had acupuncture say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?").

Three studies report what people with cancer who have had acupuncture or acupressure say about it. In all three studies participants had very positive perceptions of the benefits of acupuncture or said they experienced improvements in symptoms. People reported relaxation, decreases in hot flushes, improved wellbeing and empowerment in controlling nausea and vomiting.

All of the studies in this section can be criticised for the methods they used such as not asking a good range of people. However, they are still useful to give you an idea of what having acupuncture might be like. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

Are there any legal issues?

In the UK acupuncture therapists are not regulated by law. However, the governing bodies that represent acupuncture and the health professions council are working towards regulation. Today, acupuncture may be practiced by doctors, nurses and physiotherapists who have qualified as acupuncturists and by those who have trained exclusively in traditional acupuncture or traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). The two main organisations that oversee the voluntary regulation of acupuncturists in the UK are the British Acupuncture Council (BACC) for traditional acupuncture, and the British Medical Acupuncture Society (BMAS) for western medical acupuncture (contact details are at the end of this sheet).

How much does it cost?

Cost of an acupuncture session with a private therapist ranges between £15 and £60 per session². Acupuncture is available in some parts of the UK from the NHS – your GP should have information about this.

What's the evidence?

Good enough evidence exists to support the use of acupuncture to help relieve nausea and vomiting. However, more good quality research needs to be done to investigate acupuncture's effects on other cancer symptoms. Acupuncture is also considered to be safe, if practiced by a qualified practitioner, therefore Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports its use for people with cancer.

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

Is acupuncture safe?

If practiced by a trained professional therapist acupuncture is considered to be generally safe³. Serious adverse effects associated with acupuncture are rare¹. Documented safety risks associated with acupuncture include infection from unsterilized needles (safe practitioners use disposable sterile needles to solve this problem), dizziness, fainting, nerve damage, swelling, dermatitis, internal bleeding, pain and fainting.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

1. NCI. Acupuncture (PDQ) Health professional Version [Web Page]. Accessed 10 May 2007 URL: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/cam/acupuncture/HealthProfessional>
2. The Which Guide to Complementary Medicine: New approaches to good practice. (2002). Which Books. London.
3. Vincent C. The safety of acupuncture. BMJ 2001; 323(7311):467-8.

Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org
- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk
- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

National organisations that represent the therapy:

- British Acupuncture Council. T: 020 8735 0404, web: www.acupuncture.org.uk, email: info@acupuncture.org.uk
- British Medical Acupuncture Society. T: 01606 786782, web: www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk, email: admin@medical-acupuncture.org.uk
- Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine (ATCM) UK <http://www.atcm.co.uk/>

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

If you have any questions please contact us

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