

# ACUPUNCTURE

## Patient Information Leaflet on Acupuncture

### A/ Background

Acupuncture is a treatment with Eastern origins. It has been used for at least 2000 years in traditional Chinese medicine, possibly longer. Fine needles are inserted at certain sites in the body for therapeutic or preventative purposes. Acupuncture is often considered a form of complementary or alternative medicine (CAM).

It is used in many NHS and private settings, as well as in the majority of pain management clinics and hospices in the UK. This can be carried out by medical practitioners and allied health professionals trained in it (e.g. physiotherapists).

### B/ How does acupuncture work?

- *Western medical acupuncture (WMA)* is the use of acupuncture following a medical diagnosis. It involves stimulating sensory nerves under the skin and in the muscles of the body. This is sometimes also referred to as *dry needling* or *intramuscular stimulation (IMS)*.

This results in the body producing natural substances, such as pain-relieving endorphins. It's likely that these naturally released substances are responsible for the beneficial effects experienced with acupuncture. A course of acupuncture usually creates longer lasting pain relief than when a single treatment is used.

- *Traditional acupuncture* employs a different philosophy and is based on the Eastern belief that an energy, or "life force", flows through the body in channels called meridians. This life force is known as Qi (pronounced "chee").

Practitioners who adhere to traditional beliefs about acupuncture believe that when Qi doesn't flow freely through the body, this can cause illness. They also believe acupuncture can restore the flow of Qi, and so restore health.

### C/ Uses of acupuncture

Acupuncture practitioners use it to treat a wide range of health conditions. Acupuncture is often used to treat many musculoskeletal conditions (injuries of the bones and muscles) and pain conditions, including:

- Joint and muscle pain (e.g. neck, back, shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand, hip, knee, ankle and foot, buttock, hamstring, groin, pelvis and thigh injuries)
- Acute and chronic pain syndromes
- Headaches (e.g. migraines, tension headaches)
- Dental pain (e.g. TMJ pain)
- Postoperative pain

### D/ How acupuncture is performed

An acupuncture treatment session varies and can usually last from 10-30 minutes. At the initial visit, this will involve an assessment of your medical history and a physical examination, followed by insertion of the acupuncture needles.

During the session, you'll usually be asked to sit or lie down. You may also be asked to remove some clothing so the practitioner can access certain parts of your body.

The skin will be cleaned and needles inserted into specific places on the body, which practitioners call acupuncture points. The needles used are fine and usually a few centimetres long. They will be single-use, pre-sterilised needles that are disposed of immediately after use. The needles may be inserted just under the skin, or deeper so they reach muscle tissue. Once the needles are in place, they may be removed soon after or left in position for a length of time lasting several minutes.

Acupuncture practitioners choose specific points to place the needles, based on your condition. Multiple points may be used during a treatment session, sometimes more depending on the number of symptoms you have and also based on the practitioner's experience.

You may feel a tingling or a dull ache when the needles are inserted. In some cases, the muscle may twitch if the acupuncture needle reaches a particularly tight area. In some cases, your practitioner may rotate the needles or stimulate them with a mild electric current (known as electroacupuncture).

### **E/ Acupuncture safety and side effects**

When carried out by a qualified practitioner, acupuncture is generally very safe.

Some people experience mild, short-lived side effects such as:

- Pain where the needles puncture the skin (variable but this can last for hours to several days)
- Bleeding or bruising where the needles puncture the skin
- Drowsiness
- Feeling nauseous
- Feeling faint or lightheaded
- Worsening of pre-existing symptoms (often followed by the original symptoms improving)

After treatment, patients are reassessed to ensure they are well enough to leave. It is usually a good idea to **consume food and hydrate well with clear fluids or juice** immediately after treatment to minimise the risk of fainting. **Oral painkillers** (e.g. paracetamol or ibuprofen in patients who have no medication allergies to them) can also be very helpful to minimise the sensation of post-treatment soreness and pain.

### **F/ Specific precautions**

If you have a bleeding disorder such as haemophilia or are taking anticoagulants such as warfarin or heparin, please alert your acupuncture practitioner before you have acupuncture so that they are aware.

Acupuncture is also not usually advised if you have a severe metal allergy or an infection in the area where needles may be inserted.

It is generally safe to have acupuncture when you are pregnant. However, do let your acupuncture practitioner know if you are pregnant because certain acupuncture points are avoided during pregnancy.

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