The Pros and Cons of Acupuncture for MS

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Acupuncture for MS Treatment

Since there is no cure for MS, health practitioners are always sourcing new physical therapies, treatment combinations, and medications to relieve the symptoms and help ease the burden of MS. Complementary therapy has earned a spot in modern medicine, and even centuries-old approaches like acupuncture may have a place in today's MS management.

As with most physical approaches to disease management, acupuncture brings some concerns, as well as hope. At best, it can have remarkably positive, almost immediate effects on movement and feeling, but there's also the possibility of disappointment and complications.

A better understanding of how acupuncture may work, what it involves, and how it measures up to scientific standards will help you decide if it's the right therapy for your MS.

The Theory behind Acupuncture for MS

Since acupuncture is an Eastern medicinal practice, the explanation behind it may seem unclear to Western sensibilities. However, what acupuncture experts see as a realignment of energy could be explained in scientific terms by the release of opiods to the nervous system, or changes in neuroendocrine function. It's this impact on the nervous system that holds the most promise for MS patients, since MS is a neurological disorder.

Acupuncture is a detailed approach that works the body in very specific ways.

The Foundations of Acupuncture

In general terms, acupuncture involves correcting the flow of energy through your body. The Chinese call this flow "qi", and it travels through 14 pathways. When the flow is uneven or blocked, illness results.

The acupuncturist uses special, thin needles at points along the 14 pathways to stimulate and adjust the energy flow. They are inserted into the skin and left for a period of time, but since they are extremely thin, you generally won't feel a thing.

Scalp Acupuncture

This is a relatively new technique, and it's been gaining ground in the holistic community over the past few years. Scalp acupuncture combines ancient Chinese needle therapy with Western knowledge of the brain to interact with the cerebral cortex; the aim is to interfere, adjust, or manoeuver the nerve pathways in a few different sections of the brain, which may relieve the neurological symptoms of MS.

Advocates insist that scalp acupuncture is the most effective for MS. Some report drastic, almost immediate

improvements – even one short session can bring noticeable results. In other cases, needling on the scalp is combined with regular body acupuncture, electroacupuncture, or moxibustion.

Next page: evidence to support acupuncture, and risks, precautions and side effects.

Evidence to Support Acupuncture for MS Treatment

The good news is that many MS patients report remarkable relief with regular acupuncture sessions; the bad news is there isn't much scientific proof to back that up. While some studies have focused on the effectiveness of acupuncture, most haven't been well controlled, and the analysis has been inadequate.

A few studies point to extremely successful cases of MS patients who received scalp acupuncture. Some report that the numbness, tingling, burning, mobility issues, and bladder incontinence was significantly reduced almost right away. While this is certainly wonderful news for these patients, it's important not to expect that it will be the case for everyone – especially when there's no firm explanation behind it.

Since there's a lack of scientific evidence and documentation, acupuncture is considered an alternative treatment; when it's used alongside with your regular MS medication regime, it's considered a complementary therapy. Many doctors agree that, while it's too risky as a first line of defense, incorporating acupuncture into your MS routine may help ease symptoms like pain, muscle spasms, and bladder control issues.

Risks, Precautions and Side Effects

Before you sign up for a month's worth of sessions, consider if and how acupuncture will benefit you. Some aspects of the therapy could put you at risk, and it's important to understand how to counter that risk before you begin:

- **Infection**. Perhaps the biggest risk is with needle contamination, which could transfer an infection or disease to the patient (namely, hepatitis or HIV).The only way to prevent against possible transmission is for the acupuncturist to use fresh, sterile, and disposable needles. Reputable acupuncture therapists should have a spotless track record, and be willing to demonstrate the cleanliness of their operation before they begin.

- **Immune suppression**. Ultimately, acupuncture aims to improve immunity by helping the body regain its healthy, natural function. However, results of studies have been mixed when it comes to immune function: some research suggests that immunity is enhanced in patients with immune-compromised illnesses like cancer and lupus, but other studies show no change, or in some cases, an inhibiting effect. Given that MS involves an overactive immune response, it's important to weigh these possibilities.
- **Pain and irritation**. About 10% of acupuncture patients will experience fairly minor side effects, like bleeding, bruising, or pain at the site of the needle. Those who are particularly anxious may feel lightheaded, even faint or vomit, but that could be due to the thought of the procedure rather than the procedure itself. Very rarely, the needle can pierce a major organ, or in the case of scalp acupuncture, cause nerve or brain damage.

The benefits of acupuncture for MS are not guaranteed, but there are some reasons to try out this natural multiple sclerosis treatment – as long as your doctor gives you the OK. For one, it can be cheaper and less invasive than other treatments, and while it's not a replacement for medication, you may find it more helpful than some other physical therapies.

But just as you look to your doctor for advice and guidance, the most important aspect of any acupuncture treatment is your acupuncturist. Do your research, gather references, and conduct brief interviews before you decide which professional to trust with your health.