

Acupuncture and Palliative Care

Kell Mitchell, MD
University of Virginia HPM Fellow

Disclosures

Unfortunately none :(



Outline

1. What is acupuncture?
2. It's not all needles
3. Acupuncture vs dry needling
4. What does science say?
5. Uses in palliative care
6. Contraindications
7. Insurance and acupuncture

What is Acupuncture?

- A 3000-year old method of diagnosing and treating illness
- Part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) along with herbs, diet, and massage
- Uses super thin needles in the skin that are then manipulated
- Realigning the Qi (Chi)

NEEEEEDESSSSS.... But doesn't it hurt?



Who can practice Acupuncture?

- It's a master's degree or a doctorate, y'all
- they have their own boards
- TCM certification can be concomitant or separate



Meridians and Qi

Meridians are the lines connecting the acupuncture points.

Acupuncture points are the spots where the Qi flows easily, leaks out, or enters the body.

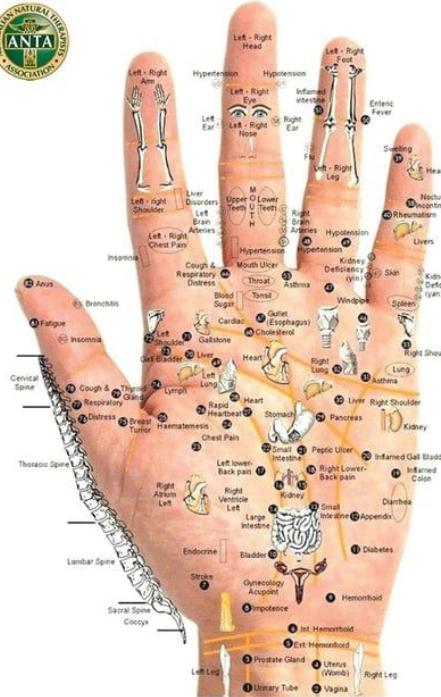
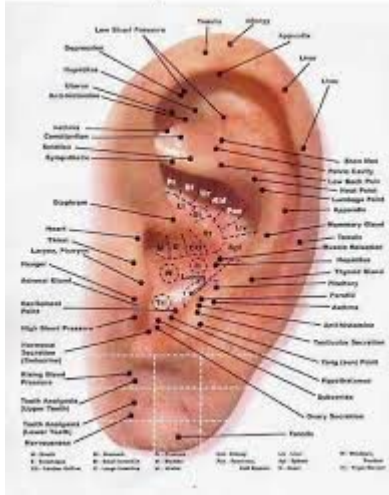
The theory is that the surface of the body is connected to internal organs by these meridians.

12 channels: inner ones for viscera and then the outer limb ones



Needling

The OG of acupuncture.



HOW SMALL ARE ACUPUNCTURE NEEDLES?



Cupping

Cupping can be “dry” or “wet” - no bloodletting or bloodletting

It requires the proper amount of suction



Moxibustion

Burning Mugwort leaves - direct or indirect

“Dredging the meridians”

Modern moxibustion?



Massage and Pressure



What if my patient is afraid of the needles and the cups and the fire?

...Or they're on warfarin?

Pressure can also be used.

Dry needling vs acupuncture

Dry needling

1. Thiccc bois - smallest 0.18mm
2. Trigger points
3. Short, 20 minute or less adventure
4. Fewer sessions
5. Relieve muscle tension/myofascial release
6. Better for acute, muscular pain
7. PM&R trained

Acupuncture

1. Super thin needles - as small as 0.12mm
2. Acupressure points
3. 30 min to hours adventure
4. Lotsa repeat sessions
5. Realign the flow of Qi
6. Better for chronic pain of any source
7. TCM trained

Weird Science

Original Investigation | Oncology



November 11, 2022

Comparison of Acupuncture vs Sham Acupuncture or Waiting List Control in the Treatment of Aromatase Inhibitor-Related Joint Pain A Randomized Clinical Trial

Dawn L. Hershman, MD, MS¹; Joseph M. Unger, PhD, MS^{2,3}; Heather Greenlee, ND, PhD²; [et al](#)

Aromatase inhibitor joint pain: reduced pain at 52 weeks compared to controls

Weird Science

Original Investigation | Oncology



November 11, 2022

Comparison of Acupuncture vs Sham Acupuncture or Waiting List Control in

Review

> [J Altern Complement Med.](#) 2009 Mar;15(3):213-6. doi: 10.1089/acm.2008.0356.

1-

Sham acupuncture may be as efficacious as true acupuncture: a systematic review of clinical trials

se, ND, PhD²; et al

Howard H Moffet ¹

But this systematic review found no statistically significant difference in 22/38 studies compared to sham

Weird Science

Original Investigation | Oncology



November 11, 2022

Comparison of Acupuncture vs Sham Acupuncture or Waiting List Control in

Review

> [J Altern Complement Med.](#) 2009 Mar;15(3):213-6. doi: [10.1089/acm.2008.0356](#).

1-

Sham acupuncture may be as efficacious as true

[BMC Complement Med Ther.](#) 2023; 23: 173.

Published online 2023 May 30. doi: [10.1186/s12906-023-04007-7](#)

PMCID: PMC10227975

PMID: [37254178](#)

Descriptions of sham acupuncture in randomised controlled trials: a critical review of the literature

[Yixuan Xie](#),¹ [Xiaoyu Liu](#),² [Tinglan Liu](#),¹ [Chiyun Sun](#),¹ [Zeyin Xin](#),¹ [Yuzhi Hu](#),¹ [Yue Wang](#),¹ [Cheng Zhang](#),¹ and [Shiyan Yan](#)[✉]

1

BUT THIS SYSTEMATIC REVIEW was like, dude, wait, we have no good way to evaluate sham acupuncture

Weird Science

Original Investigation | Oncology



November 11, 2022

Comparison of Acupuncture vs Sham Acupuncture or Waiting List Control in

Review

> [J Altern Complement Med.](#) 2009 Mar;15(3):213-6. doi: 10.1089/acm.2008.0356. 1-

SI

> [Explore \(NY\).](#) 2015 Sep-Oct;11(5):357-62. doi: 10.1016/j.explore.2015.06.001. Epub 2015 Jul 2.

BMJ

Pub

Acupuncture to Treat the Symptoms of Patients in a Palliative Care Setting

0227975

[7254178](#)

De

[Melissa J Romeo](#)¹, [Barbara Parton](#)², [Rachel A Russo](#)³, [Lewis S Hays](#)⁴, [Lisa Conboy](#)⁵

the

literature

[Yixuan Xie](#),¹ [Xiaoyu Liu](#),² [Tinglan Liu](#),¹ [Chiyun Sun](#),¹ [Zeyin Xin](#),¹ [Yuzhi Hu](#),¹ [Yue Wang](#),¹ [Cheng Zhang](#),¹ and [Shiyan Yan](#)¹

1

BUT THIS SYSTEMATIC REVIEW was like, dude, wait, we have no good way to evaluate sham acupuncture, so how can we even be doing these studies in the first place

Weird Science

Original Investigation | Oncology

November 11, 2022



[BMJ Support Palliat Care](#). 2021 Sep; 11(3): 264–270.

PMCID: PMC8380897

Published online 2021 Jan 13. doi: [10.1136/bmjspcare-2020-002638](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjspcare-2020-002638)

PMID: [33441387](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33441387/)

Acupuncture for palliative cancer pain management: systematic review

[Juan Yang](#),¹ [Dietlind L Wahner-Roedler](#),¹ [Xuan Zhou](#),² [Lesley A Johnson](#),³ [Alex Do](#),¹ [Deirdre R Pachman](#),⁴

[Tony Y Chon](#),¹ [Manisha Salinas](#),⁵ [Denise Millstine](#),³ and [Brent A Bauer](#)^{✉1}

Pub

Palliative Care Setting

75

[7254178](#)

De
literatu

Acupuncture for palliative cancer pain management: systematic review

[Yixuan X](#)

1

[Juan Yang](#)¹, [Dietlind L Wahner-Roedler](#)¹, [Xuan Zhou](#)², [Lesley A Johnson](#)³, [Alex Do](#)¹, [Deirdre R Pachman](#)⁴, [Tony Y Chon](#)¹, [Manisha Salinas](#)⁵, [Denise Millstine](#)³ and [Brent A Bauer](#)¹

Correspondence to Dr Brent A Bauer, Division of General Internal Medicine, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, USA 55905;

BUT THIS: Bauer.Brent@mayo.edu

so how can we even be doing these studies in the first place

Weird Science: why does it work?

[BMC Complement Altern Med.](#) 2006; 6: 25.

PMCID: PMC1523365

Published online 2006 Jul 7. doi: [10.1186/1472-6882-6-25](https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6882-6-25)

PMID: [16824230](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16824230/)

How might acupuncture work? A systematic review of physiologic rationales from clinical trials

[Howard H Moffet](#)^{✉1}

Weird Science: why does it work?

[BMC Complement Altern Med](#)

Published online 2006 J

How might acupunct
trials

[Howard H Moffet](#)^{✉1}



PMCID: PMC1523365

PMID: [16824230](#)

rationales from clinical

Uses in palliative care

Cancer pain

Neuropathy pain (not numbness)

Fatigue

Mood (depression/anxiety)

Dyspnea

Nausea

Muscle tension

Chronic pain syndromes

Perks:

1. It isn't medication.
2. It spares the opioids.
3. It's minimally invasive
4. Good for the hard to treat chronic stuff
5. People who have relief often have it for a long time.

When is it a bad idea?

Absolute contraindications:

1. Thrombocytopenia
2. Lymphopenia (esp neutropenia)
3. Lymphedema
4. Spastic movements
5. Spinal instability
6. Sensory deficit
7. Scar and keloid placement
8. Active infection, especially of the skin

Relative contraindications or special precautions taken:

1. Pregnancy
2. Anticoagulation
3. Hemophilia
4. Epilepsy
5. Poor skin condition
6. Immunosuppression
7. Pacemaker or spinal cord stimulator
8. Fear of needles
9. Not down to clown

Other treatment considerations:

There are many puncture wounds. No hot tubs, baths, etc for a few days after.

They typically should not drive themselves to sessions. Some people get lightheaded after.

They should limit activity after acupuncture sessions and drink lots of water.

People may poop or pee more after a session.

Some people cry or have strong emotions during sessions. This is normal.

Caffeine, alcohol, and high sugar foods should be avoided that day.

Some bruising and soreness is normal. A lot of bruising is not.

How do we get this paid for?

1. Private insurance
 - a. Sometimes they have to fail one or two things, like physical therapy, or at least one or two pain meds (that doesn't mean opioids).
2. Medicare (part B) gives you 20 sessions/year, and an additional 8 if its working.
3. Similar for medicaid.
4. You can deduct it as a medical expense on your taxes if you do pay out of pocket.
5. OOP cost: 75-300\$ per session, depending on location and session length.



In summary

-Acupuncture uses needles and cups and burnt herbs and massage to Do the Thing™

-the goal is Qi alignment

-it's good for a lot of symptoms!

-but it's not for everyone :(

-we don't know why it works. Or if it works. Maybe it's a great placebo. But it does... something. Or we would've stopped by now. Right?

-dry needling isn't acupuncture

-most insurances will cover it, but it may take some failure of "traditional therapies" first. As of the 3000 year old one isn't traditional.

You got
Q's?

I got A's. Maybe. Hopefully. Ask 'em regardless.