

CLIENT: SPASEEKERS

Treatment guide: Acupuncture

What is acupuncture and how does it work?

Acupuncture is an alternative treatment based on ancient Chinese medicine. Acupuncture works by stimulating the body to produce natural chemicals and painkillers, such as endorphins. It does this by focusing on the sensory nerves in the muscles and under the skin. Beyond this, practitioners believe that acupuncture can have health benefits by restoring the flow of Qi (or 'life force') through channels (or 'meridians') in the body.

The treatment involves the use of fine needles that a trained acupuncturist inserts into specific parts of the body to stimulate the central nervous system. These acupuncture points are located across the body, including the arms, legs, back of the neck and forehead. Up to 12 points may be targeted during a session. The needles are inserted and left in place for up to half an hour. Sometimes they are gently manipulated by the practitioner. Acupuncture can be a one-time restorative treatment, or a course of up to 10 sessions may be recommended following an initial consultation.

Does acupuncture hurt?

The fact that acupuncture uses needles can be enough to put many people off! However, the type of needle used and the method of insertion employed mean that you should not experience pain during the treatment. Instead, you may feel pressure, aching or a tingling sensation at the point of needle insertion.

Side-effects of acupuncture

Some people experience minor short-term effects following an acupuncture session. These may include light-headedness, drowsiness and localised bruising or bleeding at the needle insertion sites.

Who should avoid acupuncture?

Acupuncture is generally safe, as long as it's carried out by a qualified acupuncturist who uses sterilised single-use needles in a hygienic treatment room. However, if you have a bleeding disorder or you use anticoagulants, you should avoid acupuncture. Other conditions that may make acupuncture an unsuitable treatment include:

- immune disorders
- skin disorders or infections (specifically at the needle site)

- metal allergies
- heart valve disease

NB: We would always recommend talking to your doctor before undergoing any type of treatment for a new or pre-existing condition.

What conditions can be treated by acupuncture?

The positive effects of acupuncture are largely due to its pain-relieving properties. Beyond this, practitioners believe acupuncture releases energy blockages within the body, which restores balance. How acupuncture works is still not entirely known. However, health conditions that may be improved or alleviated by acupuncture include:

Hay fever: Acupuncture may reduce the inflammatory substances in the immune-system that are involved in allergic reactions.

Depression and anxiety: Acupuncture promotes the release of endorphins that can boost your mood. Additionally, practitioners believe that energy blockages in the body can contribute to emotional symptoms, so acupuncture can help by releasing these blockages.

Rheumatoid arthritis: The endorphin release acts as a natural painkiller, which means acupuncture can help ease pain, alongside conventional treatments and medication recommended by your doctor.

Chronic pain (including back pain and sciatica): Again, the release of endorphins produces a natural painkilling effect that can potentially help to alleviate pain.

High blood pressure (hypertension): Some studies have shown positive effects on patients with high blood pressure, both with acupuncture and electroacupuncture (where a mild electric current travels through the needles). It is thought the treatment may stimulate the nerves that in turn stimulate the parts of the brain that control blood pressure. Again, you should only use acupuncture alongside conventional treatments recommended by your doctor.

Headaches/migraine: Again, the release of endorphins through stimulation of the immune and circulatory systems is thought to trigger healing.

Period pain: Acupuncture may offer relief by reducing stress and improving blood flow to the pelvic area and uterine lining. It could also help to regulate your cycle.

Menopause symptoms: Acupuncture may help to balance hormones, easing hot flushes, insomnia and irritability and aiding in more restful sleep. It may particularly offer relief to women who are unable to use hormone replacement therapy or who are looking for an alternative.

Digestive disorders (including irritable bowel syndrome): Acupuncture can potentially help by regulating endocrine and nervous system hyperactivity, which can accompany digestive and bowel disorders.

Reproductive issues: Acupuncture has also proven effective in helping women conceive. This has been attributed to the fact it can help reduce stress, increase blood flow to the reproductive organs and balance the endocrine system, which (among other things) regulates reproduction.

Don't forget that acupuncture is an alternative therapy, so it's always recommended to discuss your symptoms with a doctor. They can advise you on conventional treatments that may be more appropriate or suggest how to combine acupuncture with medication and/or lifestyle changes to achieve the best outcome.

Is acupuncture effective?

When it comes to acupuncture benefits, studies have been carried out demonstrating that the treatment is indeed effective in addressing a host of conditions. You can find out more in this [World Health Organization](#) report. Chapter three includes a list of disorders that clinical trials have shown have been improved through acupuncture. However, it is important to first obtain a diagnosis from a doctor and to discuss whether acupuncture could be a treatment option.

An expert's opinion

We asked Sue Davis, director of health & wellness at the luxury Lifehouse Spa & Hotel what she thinks about acupuncture:

“Acupuncture is often a therapy people are curious about and so offering this in a spa setting works well as guests are more relaxed and open to trying out new experiences.

“Many of our guests turn to acupuncture for painful conditions such as arthritic joints, back pain or those who feel generally unwell but have no obvious diagnosis. It is especially beneficial for those who are trying to conceive. We have seen great results with ladies of a certain age going through the menopause.

“Facial acupuncture is becoming increasingly popular for those seeking a natural lift and our acupuncturist uses special fine needles for this purpose.”

Acupuncture during pregnancy

Acupuncture is not off-limits for pregnant women and can be beneficial in treating pregnancy-related issues, such as morning sickness and lower back pain. However, it is extremely important that you let the acupuncturist know ahead of time that you are pregnant as they will avoid certain pressure points. It is also advisable to check with your doctor before booking this or any spa or wellness treatments. If you are looking at acupuncture as a treatment for back pain, a soothing pregnancy massage may be more suitable. Find out more in our pregnancy guides.

Finding acupuncture treatments near you

While there are lots of facilities that offer acupuncture, it is important that you choose a qualified practitioner who has professional medical credentials. The British Acupuncture Council maintains a register of accredited practitioners and you should always ask about your acupuncturist's credentials when you book.

While there are private medical clinics and hospitals that offer acupuncture, when you experience acupuncture in a spa setting, you get to enjoy your sessions in a relaxing environment that offers a range of additional beauty treatments, wellness services and leisure facilities.

How much does acupuncture cost?

Acupuncture prices can vary widely, from around £25 a session upward. Sometimes acupuncture and other alternative treatments are covered by medical insurance, so it's worth checking with your insurer if you have private cover or are thinking about taking out a policy.

Acupuncture: NHS treatment

The NHS in England does offer acupuncture, but access is limited. Indeed, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines only recommend it as a treatment for migraine and chronic tension-type headaches.

Spas that offer acupuncture:

Because it is a specialised alternative therapy, you won't find acupuncture on the treatment menu at every spa, and it's not offered as part of a spa package. However, you can book acupuncture sessions at selected health spas, including:

- Lifehouse Spa & Hotel in Essex: Following an initial consultation with the therapist, an individual treatment plan will be suggested. A 55-minute session costs £85.

- Champneys Henlow Grange Health Spa in Bedfordshire: The 50-minute Chinese Body Therapy treatment combines acupuncture with tui na massage (an invigorating style of massage that is not dissimilar to Swedish massage) to promote overall healing and wellbeing.

Contact the SpaSeekers team today for more information or to book your next spa experience.