What's the point of acupuncture and acupressure? [1]

Alice,

What do you know about the medical uses of acupuncture and acupressure? Have either of these practices been helpful in treating any medical conditions? Thank you for any information you can provide me.

— Pondering pins and points

Answer

Dear Pondering pins and points,

Acupuncture and acupressure are methods of traditional Chinese medicine that are used to balance a person’s life force, or qi (pronounced “chee”). When a person’s qi is out of sync, it’s believed to cause illness or pain. While both acupuncture and acupressure are said to help increase flow through specific pathways in the body, there’s a pointed difference between these treatments. In acupuncture, a hair-like needle is inserted into areas along the body’s energy pathways and then stimulated by twirling the needle or attaching it to a mild electrical current. In acupressure, the same areas are stimulated and energy is redirected through the use of pressure applied with the fingers or small objects, such as seeds, plastic beads, or metal balls. Acupuncture and acupressure have been associated with relief of symptoms, including pain, resulting from a number of conditions, though it’s unclear the mechanisms through which the relief is provided.

Acupuncture has been used for thousands of years, but research on this form of treatment has only been conducted relatively recently. Studies have shown short-term improvements in pain relief when acupuncture is used both by itself and in conjunction with traditional pain relief strategies. Specifically, there is some evidence to suggest that it may be beneficial for those suffering from lower back pain, tension or migraine headaches, neck pain, osteoarthritis, and menstrual cramps among other ailments. Some research has also found that acupuncture can be effective at reducing nausea and vomiting post-surgery or chemotherapy. As this treatment method becomes more widely available, researchers are also studying its use as a possible treatment for addiction. A few noted caveats to mention include inconsistency in clinical guidelines for this method and that the benefits experienced by those undergoing the treatment
may be influenced by their personal belief or expectation about how well the method will work (among other factors).

Acupressure is a method, similar to acupuncture, that purportedly helps increase energy flow in the body through the use of deep pressure or massage. It’s believed that adding pressure to what are referred to as meridians or acupoints on the body initiates its ability to heal itself as a way to treat illnesses and relax the muscles. It’s also considered a less-invasive method than acupuncture. Individuals who have consistently used this treatment have reported that their symptoms improved and occurred less frequently, in many of the same conditions that have demonstrated benefit from acupuncture. Studies have also shown that acupressure may improve fatigue, insomnia, and even provide some relief from feelings of anxiety.

If you’re thinking about using acupressure or acupuncture as a method of treatment, it’s best to talk with your health care provider to discuss whether this is the right option for you. If you decide to try acupuncture, it’s recommended that you choose a licensed acupuncturist [2] to perform the procedure. Because needles are inserted into the skin, it’s possible to get infections, even hepatitis and HIV, from improperly cleaned needles that are reused. As a result, disposable acupuncture needles are now widely used. For more information on acupuncture, acupressure, and other forms of alternative medicine, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) [3] is a great source of information.

Hopefully this helped point you in the right direction in your search for more on these treatment methods!

Alice!
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