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Arthritis Health Center

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Acupuncture May Cut Arthritis Pain Study Shows Benefits in Patients With Knee, Hip Arthritis Pain

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Oct. 31, 2006 -- Acupuncture may ease hip and joint pain from osteoarthritis, the most common type of arthritis, a German study shows.

"Acupuncture should be considered as a treatment option for patients with knee or hip-associated chronic pain," write the researchers.

They included Claudia Witt, MD, of the Institute for Social Medicine at Berlin's Charite University Medical Center.

Witt's team notes "marked clinical improvement" in pain and quality of life in patients with hip and knee osteoarthritis after three months of acupuncture treatment.

In a journal editorial, two Chinese doctors support using acupuncture to help treat knee and hip osteoarthritis -- but they also note the German study's limits.

The study and editorial appear in *Arthritis & Rheumatism's* November edition.

About Acupuncture

Acupuncture is one of the world's oldest, most commonly used medical procedures, according to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM).

Started in China more than 2,000 years ago, acupuncture has become increasingly popular in Western countries. The technique involves stimulating certain points on the body, often by inserting and manipulating thin needles.

Acupuncture may be useful in treating conditions including osteoarthritis, according to background information on the NCCAM's web site.

Patients should talk to their doctors about any complementary or alternative medical treatments, including acupuncture, says the NCCAM.

Acupuncture Study

Witt's team studied more than 3,500 people in Germany with osteoarthritis of the hip and/or knee.

The patients were in their early 60s, on average. About 11% had had acupuncture in the year before the study.

First, the patients decided which joint hurt most -- their hip or knee -- and rated their pain in that joint.

Next, about 3,200 patients got up to 15 acupuncture sessions from doctors over three months. About 300 other patients went on a waiting list for the same acupuncture plan.

Afterward, about a third of the patients who had immediately gotten acupuncture reported less joint pain and better quality of life.

Those results held for three months after acupuncture treatment ended.

In contrast, such improvements were reported by about 6% patients on the acupuncture waiting list.

No serious side effects were reported. But about 5% of the acupuncture patients noted side effects such as minor bleeding, bruising, or pain where the needles were inserted.

Study's Limits

The study has some limits, note editorialists Tao Liu, MD, and Chen Liu, MD, of China's Jilin University.

For instance, most patients insisted on getting acupuncture right away. They might have believed acupuncture would help them; that belief may have swayed the results.

Also, no patients got sham acupuncture, which would have been useful as a comparison.

So it's not clear if other factors (such as caring medical attention) had any effect, note the editorialists.

"Given that the biologic mechanism of acupuncture is still unclear, the study by Witt et al. furthers our understanding of acupuncture and adds to the accumulated evidence supporting its efficacy," they write.

"Such evidence warrants extensive use of acupuncture in various chronic pain conditions," the Chinese doctors write.

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