

The Evidence Mounts For Acupuncture To Treat Period Pains

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A new study published in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* analyses the evidence base for the use of acupuncture to treat period pains and concludes that the available evidence is promising.

Around 40 - 50% of young women have experienced primary dysmenorrhoea, or menstrual cramps, the cause of which is usually unknown (when the causes are known, it is referred to as 'Secondary' dysmenorrhoea, eg. uterine fibroids, pelvic infection, endometriosis etc). For some women, the pain can become more severe or may last for longer as they grow older. There are also other related symptoms such as nausea, diarrhoea, migraine, backache and mood swings. Common treatments include exercise, applying heat onto the lower abdomen or the use of painkillers. The use of acupuncture to treat dysmenorrhoea has in recent years been the subject of study but results have so far been inconclusive.

Researchers from the Oriental Hospital at Kyung Hee University Medical Centre in Korea conducted a systematic review of all randomised control trails (RCTs) on the use of acupuncture to treat dysmenorrhoea. A wide search of papers published internationally up till July 2008 was undertaken. The RCTs that were chosen examined women of reproductive age with primary dysmenorrhoea, comparing those who were treated with acupuncture with a control group, which included no treatment, placebo treatment, or pharmacological or non-pharmacological treatments (eg. psychological interventions). The types of acupuncture evaluated were classical acupuncture, electroacupuncture, laser acupuncture, electrical auricular acupuncture, auricular acupuncture, auricular acupressure and acupoint injection.

27 relevant studies involving 2,960 subjects met the study criteria. According to researchers, the data reviewed showed that acupuncture was the preferred option for reducing pain when compared to pharmacological treatment or herbal remedies. The researchers observe that there is convincing evidence on the effectiveness of using acupuncture to treat pain as it stimulates the production of endorphins and serotonin in the central nervous system.

Researchers note however, that there were methodological flaws in some studies, so these results should be interpreted with some caution. For this reason, further research is needed into the effects of acupuncture on dysmenorrhoea and researchers recommend that future clinical trials follow standard guidelines in their reporting.

Professor Philip Steer, *BJOG* editor-in-chief, said "Some women suffer from intense period pains so much so that they are unable to function normally. It isn't just pins and needles.

"Women with primary dysmenorrhoea should consult their GPs or gynaecologists on the best treatment available to them. Complementary therapies should not be used exclusively, at the expense of conventional treatment, unless significant improvements have been made and your doctor tells you otherwise."

Notes

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