

## What is acupuncture?

Historically, acupuncture is one component of traditional Chinese medicine. It is a method of inserting fine needles into the body at specific points to stimulate healing. These points can be stimulated by other methods as well, such as acupressure massage. Sometimes, a small electrical current is passed through the acupuncture needles.

## How does acupuncture work?

We don't know for sure, however there are some ideas. The classical Chinese explanation is that a life energy, called *qi* (pronounced CHEE), circulates in channels, called *meridians* throughout the body much like blood circulates in arteries and veins. If the *qi* is blocked, disease can occur. Acupuncture is a method to balance the flow of *qi*. There are many studies demonstrating how acupuncture affects the body processes, but we don't know the entire story. It has been shown to stimulate the nervous system, releasing chemicals that effect pain.

## Who benefits from acupuncture?

Research to date shows acupuncture may be beneficial for some patients with chronic pain, especially musculoskeletal pain, and for nausea and vomiting. Other conditions may benefit from acupuncture, but studies are not clear.

## Who does acupuncture?

Acupuncture is most commonly done by Licensed Acupuncturists (LAc). In California, LAc's are certified by the California Acupuncture Board after completing a training program and successfully passing a certifying examination. Physicians practice acupuncture under their medical license. At KP, physician acupuncturists have completed a specific course of acupuncture study.

## Will acupuncture cure my pain?

Acupuncture can help decrease pain for some people, some of the time. Although it *may* last for

a long time, it is usually temporary. Therefore, acupuncture is one method to decrease pain while you learn other forms of pain management. Most clinicians recommend using acupuncture as a way to establish pain control so that you can participate in other forms of pain management that can maintain pain relief.

## How long with the pain relief last?

It varies, but usually acupuncture gives temporary relief, lasting hours, days, or weeks. Acupuncture is meant to control pain while you participate in the complete pain management program.

## How will I know if acupuncture will work?

We generally know if acupuncture will help you within 4-5 treatments. When it does help, it can be immediate, or it may take a number of treatments. It is often helpful to keep a log of how your symptoms respond.

## Does acupuncture hurt?

It is unusual for the needles to really hurt, but if they do, let the acupuncturist know right away. Most patients feel only minimal pain as the needles are inserted, or as they are stimulated. Some feel no pain at all.

## Is acupuncture safe?

Yes, this procedure is safe. However, like with any procedure there are risks, side effects, and the possibility of complications. Risks from acupuncture are very rare. These risks include infection, bleeding, or injury (e.g. collapsed lung). We only use sterile needles one time, so the risk of infection is minimal. If you have difficulty stopping your bleeding for any reason, let the acupuncturist know. It is very rare for the needle to injure a body part. Occasionally people feel faint from the needle. At times symptoms may fluctuate, increasing or decreasing, associated with the treatment.

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## How do I get acupuncture?

Your physician or nurse practitioner must refer you to the acupuncture program, which may be associated with the chronic pain program. The clinicians in the acupuncture program will determine whether acupuncture would be an appropriate component of the treatment program for your condition.

## Is acupuncture covered by my Kaiser Permanente health care plan?

Yes and no. Like most of the services and treatments Kaiser Permanente provides, it is an option that can be used when it is appropriate. Clinical recommendations for the use of acupuncture are based on the available scientific evidence. Periodically we review the medical literature to make decisions on which types of conditions will respond to acupuncture care. At this time acupuncture is recommended as an option in the care of patients with chronic pain.

## Who shouldn't get acupuncture?

Contraindications for acupuncture include difficulty with bleeding problems or on anti-coagulant medicine; active infection over the site to be needed; pregnancy is avoided because of the risk of inducing labor. Electrical acupuncture is not recommended for patients with pacemakers.

## What do I do if acupuncture does not work for my pain or I don't want it?

Sometimes acupuncture works, and sometimes it doesn't. The treatment of chronic pain generally consists of several methods used in combination, rather than just one method alone. Research has shown that physical therapy, medications, exercise, relaxation, and changing negative thought patterns can help people better manage pain. Acupuncture is meant to help while you learn other self-management techniques, such as acupressure, physical rehabilitation and exercise, as well as psychotherapy (e.g. cognitive behavioral therapy). Discuss these and other options with

your physician, chronic pain management specialist, or Licensed Acupuncturist for more information.

## What is acupressure and how is it different from acupuncture?

Acupressure is an ancient Chinese healing art that uses the fingers to press key points on the surface of the skin that are thought to stimulate the body's natural healing abilities. It is believed that when these points are pressed, they release qi in order to stimulate healing, and decrease muscle tension, as well as promote the circulation of blood and body fluids.

Acupuncture and acupressure use the same key points. The difference is that in acupuncture needles are used to stimulate these points, whereas in acupressure fingers and pressure are used to stimulate these points.

While receiving acupuncture you may also be taught acupressure. It is important for you to practice acupressure at home. Practicing acupressure at home can maximize the benefits of acupuncture.

### When to call Kaiser Permanente

If after acupuncture, you experience:

- Bleeding at the needle site that will not stop
- Redness, swelling, and symptoms of infection at the needle site

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical care and information you receive from your physician or health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your physician or other health care professional