

## Acupuncture

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*This PEF is the first in a series that will discuss common complementary and alternative treatments that older adults may wish to explore, including: (1) Acupuncture, (2) Spinal Manipulation, and (3) Herbal Remedies.*

The term “Complementary and Alternative Medicine” refers to treatments not usually prescribed by doctors in the United States. Patients often use these therapies in conjunction with those prescribed by their primary health care provider. Older adults may turn to alternative treatments when their medical treatments are not working or they are experiencing unpleasant side effects from medications.

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### Q . What is acupuncture?

A . Acupuncture is a procedure where very fine needles are placed just below the skin’s surface in different parts of the body called “acupuncture points,” for example, in the neck, back, arms, legs, and ears. These points are areas of designated electrical sensitivity that have been shown to be effective in the treatment of specific health problems. Typically, needles are left in place for 30 minutes.

Acupuncture is a method of encouraging the body to promote natural healing and improve function. It originated in China more than 3,000 years ago, and has spread to other countries such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and to Europe and America.

### Q . How does acupuncture work?

A . According to Chinese medical theory, the body’s life energy or “Qi” (pronounced chee), flows through the body on channels known as meridians, connecting all of our major organs. When energy is “stuck,” people develop pain and other symptoms of illness. The goal of acupuncture is to restore balance and make the body’s energy flow normally again.

The western medicine explanation is that the mild discomfort from acupuncture needles stimulates the release of endorphins and other pain relieving chemicals from the brain.

### Q . What kinds of conditions can acupuncture treat?

A . Acupuncture has been used for centuries to treat a wide variety of medical conditions. The World Health Organization feels that acupuncture is appropriate for treating sinus problems, tonsillitis, the common cold, asthma, bronchitis, certain eye disorders, toothaches and other mouth problems, tennis elbow, sciatica, low back pain, rheumatoid arthritis, hiccups, diarrhea, constipation and other gastrointestinal problems, headaches, trigeminal neuralgia, and other neurologic conditions.

### Q . What type of training should and an acupuncturist have?

A . When seeking an acupuncturist, you should ask where the practitioner trained, how long the training was, how long he or she has been in practice, and what experience the practitioner has in treating your specific ailment. If your state requires a license to practice, you should ask the practitioner if he or she is certified by the National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists.

### Q . How safe is acupuncture?

A . Acupuncture is very safe in the hands of a trained specialist, and he or she should discuss possible side effects with you before performing the procedure. Overall, older adults experience far fewer side effects with acupuncture than with most medications; however, if you are afraid of needles, you may feel lightheaded or faint; or if you are taking blood thinners, you may develop bruising. Patients with a pacemaker or heart rhythm problems should let the acupuncturist know.

### Q . Can acupuncture cure medical conditions?

A . Acupuncture can eliminate certain kinds of problems such as pain after dental work, or a headache. It may alleviate pain or discomfort brought on by recurring and long-term health conditions, such as low back pain, irritable bowel syndrome, and fibromyalgia. Unfortunately, it cannot cure these ailments.

### Q . How many acupuncture treatments will I need?

A . It depends on the type of problem being treated. For example, someone with arthritis and pain in their neck may need a treatment once a week for three to four weeks. A person who has had migraine headaches for many years may need treatments every week for a couple of months in order to prevent the headaches. Someone that strains his or her back may only need one treatment.

### Q . How much does acupuncture cost?

A . The cost of acupuncture varies and depends largely on the practitioner's training and the location of the practice. Unfortunately, many insurance companies, including Medicare, do not pay for acupuncture. When deciding whether you can afford acupuncture, you should consider the costs of treating your condition with medications and other treatments, and then compare that with the cost of acupuncture.

### Q . What if my health care provider does not believe in acupuncture?

A . While some physicians may have a negative opinion, most are open to acupuncture, especially when a patient has a chronic condition that has not responded to the usual treatments. **It is important for you to make sure your doctor does not have a medical reason for advising against acupuncture.** If the reason is not medical and you still wish to try it, then the decision is up to you.



**Q . How can I find a reputable acupuncturist?**

**A .** While some physicians may have a negative opinion, most are open to acupuncture, The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture can provide referrals to trained medical acupuncturists in your area. They can be contacted through e-mail at [www.medicalacupuncture.org](http://www.medicalacupuncture.org), or you can contact their office in Los Angeles at:

American Academy of Medical Acupuncture  
4929 Wilshire Boulevard  
Suite 428  
Los Angeles, CA 90010  
(323) 937-5514 - Phone

Another organization that provides referrals is the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). They can be reached at:

National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM)  
11 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 300  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 548-9004 – Phone  
(703) 548-9079 - Fax  
e-mail: [info@nccaom.org](mailto:info@nccaom.org)

Also, word of mouth can be very helpful. Speak with people who have had acupuncture treatments to learn about their experience and to get a recommendation for an acupuncturist in your area.

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