

Acupuncture in Cancer Care

Acupuncture may help relieve several cancer-related symptoms, including nausea, pain, fatigue and sleep problems

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Key Takeaways:

- Acupuncture involves inserting very thin, sterile needles into specific points on the body to relieve pain or treat various conditions.
- Clinical studies show that acupuncture may help relieve several cancer-related symptoms, including nausea, pain, fatigue and sleep problems, when performed by a qualified practitioner.
- Some leading cancer centers now integrate acupuncture into care plans, supported by 2024 clinical guidelines that help patients and providers use it effectively alongside conventional treatment.

Some people with cancer may pair conventional medical therapies with complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices. Examples of CAM include yoga, supplements, massage and acupuncture. When backed by sufficient research, some types of CAM become part of mainstream medicine.

Acupuncture is a great example of this. It is not used instead of traditional cancer treatment. Rather, it is used in addition to other treatment in a complementary way.

The National Health Interview Survey shows that the use of acupuncture in the U.S. doubled between 2002 and 2022. Acupuncture is popular because clinical research shows that it can be an effective treatment for several cancer-related symptoms. Here's what you need to know.

What Is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a practice that applies thin needles, heat or pressure on various places on the body, which are known as acupuncture points. It is believed that acupuncture originated in China thousands of years ago. In the U.S., acupuncture has been practiced for about 200 years. The FDA approved the acupuncture needle as a medical device in 1996.

How acupuncture works remains an active topic of research. It has been proposed that the insertion of needles stimulate “qi” or energy flow, which may affect a person’s emotional, mental and physical health. However, our modern understanding of anatomy shows the reported effects are likely related to how the nervous system functions.

Acupuncture guidelines for cancer care were published in 2024. Many leading cancer centers integrate acupuncture into their cancer care plans.

SAFETY FIRST: Acupuncture is considered to be a safe therapy for cancer patients and cancer survivors when practiced by qualified practitioners. It does not have serious side effects or cause adverse events.

What Is Acupuncture Used For?

Acupuncture can be used to relieve a range of cancer-related symptoms. Most research to date focuses on relief from nausea and vomiting, which may occur as a side effect from chemotherapy, radiation or surgery.

Research shows that acupuncture may also help with some other cancer-related side effects, such as:

- Pain
- Insomnia
- Cancer-related fatigue
- Sleep issues
- Dry mouth
- Lymphedema

Some studies also link acupuncture to very specific benefits for symptoms in certain types of cancer, such as hot flashes in breast cancer-related menopause, and dysphagia in nasopharyngeal cancer. You can work with your health care team to see if acupuncture may help with your specific symptoms.

How to Find a Qualified Acupuncture Practitioner

Before starting acupuncture, let your oncologist or health care provider know. They can help you find a reputable practitioner and ensure acupuncture is safe and appropriate for your specific treatment plan. More than 40 states have laws regulating acupuncture practice.

Here are some tips for finding the right practitioner.

- **Check Credentials:** Look for practitioners who are licensed or certified in your state. Most states require acupuncturists to hold a license through a state acupuncture board. You can verify credentials through your state's medical or acupuncture licensing board website. Many qualified practitioners are also certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM).
- **Ask About Cancer Care Experience:** Ask whether the practitioner has experience working with individuals undergoing cancer treatment. Some cancer centers have integrative medicine departments with credentialed acupuncturists on staff.
- **Confirm Safety Practices:** Make sure your practitioner uses single-use, sterile needles and follows clean needle techniques. Ask about infection control and how they ensure a safe treatment environment.

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