Acupuncture Relieves Chronic Cancer Pain

The need for better pain management for cancer survivors is urgent.

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The need for better pain management for cancer survivors is urgent, given that an estimated 5 million survivors in the United States experience chronic pain after treatment.

The PEACE trial—the largest study of its kind to date—recruited 360 people with a prior cancer diagnosis (including lymphoma, breast cancer and prostate cancer) but no current evidence of disease who reported musculoskeletal pain for at least three months.

The participants were randomly assigned to receive electroacupuncture (which includes an electrical current) or auricular acupuncture (which involves inserting studs into the ears for a period of days) for 10 weeks or standard care, such as pain-relieving medications, steroid injections and physical therapy. Before, during and after treatment, they were asked to rate their pain severity on a scale of 0 to 10.

As described in JAMA Oncology, electroacupuncture reduced pain severity by an average of 1.9 points, while auricular acupuncture did so by an average of 1.6 points, compared with standard care. What's more, the pain reduction with acupuncture was more durable, and recipients reported improved functioning and better quality of life.

"A one-point reduction in pain is clinically meaningful, so this is a pretty big drop," says researcher Jun Mao, MD, of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. "The pain relief of acupuncture lasts for months, which differs from pain medications, which must be taken frequently." Mao hopes these findings will encourage insurers, including Medicare, to expand coverage of acupuncture to make it accessible to more people.

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