

Acupuncture Research Update

Acupuncture & Headaches

Aged ginger is more pungent. – Chinese Proverb

Headaches are among the most common disorders of the nervous system, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). It is estimated that half to three quarters of adults aged 18–65 years in the world have had a headache in the last year. Among these individuals, 30 percent or more have reported suffering from a migraine. And 1.7 to 4 percent of the world's adult population has a headache for 15 days or more.

Headaches are disabling and can significantly influence the quality of life, especially for those suffering from chronic headache disorders. Repeated headaches affect family and personal life, affect employment and come at a great financial cost. Research shows that complementary therapies such as acupuncture, massage, yoga, biofeedback, and meditation show promising results for migraines and tension headaches. Other alternative techniques like spinal manipulation, chiropractic care, some supplements and botanicals, diet alteration, and hydrotherapy are also beneficial for migraines. However, the evidence for cluster headaches is limited.

Did You Know Acupuncture Can Help You With Headaches?

Findings from selected systematic reviews and meta-analysis summarize that acupuncture is helpful in relieving migraine, tension headaches and other types of chronic headaches and can play an important role in the treatment plan for these types of headache disorders.

A Cochrane review of 22 randomized trials compared the effects of acupuncture with sham acupuncture, usual care and drug treatment specifically on migraines. Compared to usual frequency, acupuncture improved headache frequency with 41 percent of those treated with acupuncture experiencing at least 50 percent reduction in headache frequency. Acupuncture consistently reduced headache frequency compared to sham acupuncture. After three months headache frequency at least halved in 57 percent of participants receiving acupuncture compared to 46 percent in those taking prophylactic drugs and after six months in 59 percent and 54 percent, respectively.

The authors of the review concluded, "If people have six days with migraine per month on average before starting treatment, this would be reduced to five days in people receiving only usual care, to four days in those receiving fake acupuncture or a prophylactic drug, and to three and a half days in those receiving true acupuncture."

Quality of life is greatly affected by frequent headaches and a systematic review in 2018 found that acupuncture enhanced quality of life more than medication did as it exhibits greater efficacy both in treatment and

prevention of migraines compared to no treatment, sham acupuncture and medication. Other studies that have assessed the effectiveness of acupuncture when given in addition to usual care, have found acupuncture to have clinically relevant benefits for people with headaches. In one such study, patients suffering from chronic headaches who had acupuncture experienced 34 percent fewer headache days. They used 15 percent less medication, had 15 percent fewer days off work and 25 percent fewer GP visits after one year.

How Acupuncture Helps Ease Headaches:

Various biological processes take place in the body during acupuncture. These mechanisms—the neural pathways from acupuncture point stimulation to the spinal cord and the deactivation of the pain centers in the brain—have been studied and mapped over time. A 2011 study introduces the concept of neural acupuncture unit (NAU), which is a collection of neural and neuroactive components in the body that are activated when acupuncture needles are inserted and stimulated at designated points in the body.

Also known as acupoints, these designated areas represent a "landmark system" which indicates sites of relatively dense and concentrated neural and neuroactive components. Here acupuncture stimulation can elicit a more efficient therapeutic response. Acupuncture acts through multiple pathways to produce analgesic effects and reduce central sensitization. It triggers a sequence of events that include the release of chemicals, including neurotransmitters and the body's own opioids, within the central nervous system, which produces the analgesic effect of acupuncture.

A 2018 study investigating the neurochemical responses after an acupuncture treatment for migraines found biochemical changes of brain metabolites that may be responsible for the reduction of headache intensity.

Acupuncture views headaches differently from Western medicine. A migraine, according to Western medicine, is a recurrent headache with no known cause and is commonly triggered by stress, fatigue, insomnia, menstruation and weather changes. From a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) perspective, a headache is a subjective symptom that can accompany many other signs and symptoms related to each other.

According to acupuncture, a headache can be caused by problems in other parts of the body and not necessarily only in the head or due to neurovascular dysfunction. That is why acupuncturists will diagnose and treat each individual headache accordingly. The pathological changes and conditions inside the body related to each headache is analysed by TCM practitioners to find the underlying causes of a headache before treatment begins.

Next Steps: If you or someone you know is suffering from pain, acupuncture may be able to help. Give us a call or check out our website to set up your complimentary treatment.

© 2022 Copyright Acupuncture Media Works/AcuDownloads, All Rights Reserved. The information contained within the AcuNews newsletter is only used to educate and inform. This newsletter is not a substitute for the advice of a licensed and registered health care provider. Seek prompt attention for emergencies. Consult a health care provider for specific health concerns, and before starting a diet, cleanse or exercise routine.