

# Acupuncture

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## Information for patients

This leaflet can be made available in other formats including large print, CD and Braille and in languages other than English, upon request.

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This leaflet tells you about acupuncture and will help you to understand how it works and how it may help you.

### What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture has been used for thousands of years in China. It became popular in the rest of the world in the 1970's. It is sometimes called a complementary or alternative therapy and is now often used in the NHS for the relief of pain.

Very fine, sterile, stainless steel needles are inserted into your skin by a doctor, nurse or physiotherapist, who has had additional specialist training in the use of acupuncture for pain relief.

Acupuncture is a course of treatment which must be completed to receive the full benefit. However, in some cases patients may not notice any benefit.

### What can acupuncture be used for?

Acupuncture can be used for conditions causing acute (recent, short lasting) and chronic (long lasting) pain in muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints, for example, arthritis, shoulder, neck or back pain, headaches or migraines.

Acupuncture may help some people, but it will not work for everyone.

### How does acupuncture work?

Messages are carried from the painful area, through nerves, to the brain. Acupuncture is thought to work by blocking or reducing the pain messages on their way to the brain. It increases the body's natural pain relieving substances known as "endorphins": these send messages down the spinal cord to the nerves, helping to reduce the pain.

If acupuncture works to relieve your pain it is not known how long its effect will last.

### What are the benefits of acupuncture?

The use of acupuncture may help:

- to help reduce pain, to make it easier to cope with your daily routine
- to reduce the amount of painkillers you need for pain relief
- to give a sense of wellbeing
- in some cases, patients may not notice any benefits.

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In physiotherapy, acupuncture is often used along with other treatments, for example, exercise and movement.

## What are the side effects and possible risks?

Some side effects and risks are common, usually minor and easy to treat. Serious complications are very rare.

### Minor side effects include:

- **discomfort at the needle site.** The needles used are very sharp and fine so any discomfort usually settles quickly.
- **feeling faint, fainting or nausea (feeling sick).** Acupuncture can have an effect of lowering your blood pressure during the treatment which can make some people feel faint and sick. If you have a low blood sugar level this can also make you feel faint. It may help if you have a light meal about 2 hours before your acupuncture.
- **tiredness.** Some people feel very tired after acupuncture; you should not drive until the feeling has passed.
- **your pain or symptoms may get worse.** This can last for 1 - 2 days after treatment then start to improve.
- **bruising and/or discomfort around the needle insertion site.** This may last for up to 7 days but will settle over time.
- **infection where the needles were inserted.** Despite every effort to avoid this, for example, using single use sterile needles, some people may develop an infection around the insertion site. If you develop a temperature, redness or swelling around the area where the needles have been inserted you should contact your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist for advice.

### Rare but more serious risks or side effects include:

- **"stuck needle".** This may be due to muscle spasm. Your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist is trained to deal with this.
- **broken needles.** Your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist is trained to deal with this but if they cannot remove it easily you will need to have further treatment.
- **bleeding.** If you are taking anticoagulant (blood thinning) drugs, for example, Warfarin, Heparin or Clopidogrel or suffer from haemophilia (a condition that affects blood clotting), **you must** tell your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist before having acupuncture.
- **miscarriage or early labour.** Acupuncture is not advised in early or late pregnancy. **You must** tell your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist, before having acupuncture, if you are or may be pregnant.

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## Very rarely acupuncture could lead to:

- **damage to an internal organ.** For example, if needles are used around your chest or shoulder area there is a very small risk of causing a pneumothorax (collapse of a lung).

## Are there some people who cannot have acupuncture?

Acupuncture may not be advised if you have:

- an allergy to stainless steel
- an infection or feel unwell
- uncontrolled epilepsy
- an uncontrolled heart problem
- a serious phobia (fear) of needles
- mental health problems.

## Will it be painful?

Acupuncture is very different from having an injection. You may notice some slight discomfort as the needles are inserted and for a few seconds after. It should not be painful but if any pain develops or continues around a needle site **you must** tell your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist.

## What do I need to do to prepare for my appointment?

You will receive a letter or telephone call telling you the date, time and where to go for your appointment.

You should have a light meal about 2 hours before your appointment to reduce the risk of feeling faint during acupuncture. Try to wear loose fitting, comfortable clothing. Sometimes you may be asked to undress, depending on the parts of your body where the acupuncture needles are to be inserted. Staff will make sure your privacy and dignity is protected at all times.

You should arrange for someone to take you home, after your first appointment, in case you feel tired. **You must not** drive if you feel tired.

## What will happen at my appointment?

You will be taken to a private room or area. Your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist will ask you questions about your general health and pain. He or she will explain what will happen and the risks and benefits of acupuncture. You will be asked to sign a consent form before starting your treatment. If, at any point, you change your mind about having acupuncture, let your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist know and they will stop. This will not affect any future treatment.

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Your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist will discuss the number of needles he or she is going to use, where they need to be inserted and how many sessions of acupuncture you may need.

These may change throughout the course of your treatment. You will be asked to lie on a couch or bed or sit on a chair, depending on the area to be treated. Your privacy and dignity will be protected at all times. He or she will then place the needles in the chosen points.

Acupuncture needles are very fine; as they are inserted you may feel a pin prick or slight pressure. Between 1 and 15 needles may be used during the procedure and may be left in place for about 10 - 30 minutes. After they are inserted you may notice tingling, warmth, a deep ache or no sensation at all. One or more of the needles may be stimulated (turned or moved slightly) to try and obtain these feelings. This is called "Deqi" and often shows the treatment is working.

All needles will be removed after your treatment session. They are used only once and then disposed of safely.

## What is electro-acupuncture?

During electro-acupuncture the acupuncture needles are inserted as described and are then stimulated electronically. This is done by attaching wires from a small, battery-operated stimulator which sends an electronic message to the needles. This is to help you to experience "Deqi" as described earlier.

Electro-acupuncture is not always used. Your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist will explain if they think this procedure would be of benefit.

Electro-acupuncture is not suitable for patients who have a cardiac (heart) pacemaker.

## How will I feel after my treatment?

Following your treatment you may feel very relaxed or tired. You should arrange for someone to take you home, after your first appointment, in case you feel tired. You should not drive if you feel tired.

Your pain may be relieved but sometimes the pain can be worse for a few days before you feel any improvement. Acupuncture does not always relieve pain for everyone.

## Will I need a follow-up outpatient appointment?

You will be sent or given a review appointment, when you will be able to discuss your treatment and any further management of your pain. If acupuncture has helped, further courses can be arranged for you, if needed.

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## Contact numbers

If you have any problems or need further advice you should contact the appropriate clinic or department where you had your appointment.

## University Hospital of North Tees

### Pain Clinic

telephone: 01642 383201  
Monday – Friday, 9:00am – 5:00pm

### Physiotherapy Department

telephone: 01429 522471  
Monday - Friday, 8.30am – 4.30pm

## University Hospital of Hartlepool

### Pain Clinic

telephone: 01642 383201  
Monday - Friday, 9.00am - 5.00pm  
Non-urgent messages can be left at anytime on the answering machine.

### Physiotherapy Department

telephone: 01429 522471  
Monday - Friday, 8.30am – 4.30pm

## Peterlee Community Hospital

### Physiotherapy Department

telephone: 01429 522471  
Monday - Friday, 8.30am – 4.30pm

If you have any worries or concerns you should contact your GP during normal surgery hours. Outside surgery hours, you should contact your GP's surgery for the Out of Hours Service number

## Further information is available from:

### NHS Choices

telephone: 111 (when it is less urgent than 999)  
Calls to this number are free from landlines and mobile phones  
or via the website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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## Information used in the development of this leaflet

MacPherson H, Thomas K, Walters S, Fitter M (2001) 'A Prospective survey of adverse events and treatment reactions following 34,000 consultations with professional acupuncturists'. *Acupuncture in Medicine* Vol19, pages 93-102.

MacPherson H, Hammershlag R, Lewith G, Schnyer R (2007) 'Acupuncture Research – strategies for Establishing an Evidence Base Churchill Livingstone'.

White A, Hayhoe S, Hart A, Emst E (2001) 'Adverse events following acupuncture: prospective survey of 32,000 consultations with doctors and physiotherapists', *British Medical Journal*, Vol 323, pages 485 - 487.

Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists October 2007 AACP Guidelines for Safe Practice.

# Acupuncture

This leaflet has been produced in partnership with patients and carers. All patient leaflets are regularly reviewed, and any suggestions you have as to how it may be improved are extremely valuable. Please write to the Quality Assurance Team, University Hospital of North Tees or email: [patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk](mailto:patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk)

## Comments, Concerns, Compliments or Complaints

We are continually trying to improve the services we provide.

We want to know what we're doing well or if there's anything which we can improve, that's why the Patient Experience Team is here to help.

Our Patient Experience Team is here to try to resolve your concerns as quickly as possible. If you would like to contact or request a copy of our PET leaflet, please contact:

telephone: 01642 624719  
Monday – Friday, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm  
Messages can be left on the answering machine and will be picked up throughout the day.

freephone: 0800 092 0084  
Mobile: (can use text): 0779 506 1883  
Email: [patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk](mailto:patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk)

Out of hours if you wish to speak to a senior member of Trust staff, please contact the hospital switchboard who will bleep the appropriate person.

telephone: 01642 617617  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Patient Experience Team is available to discuss your concerns in person Monday – Friday, 1.30 pm – 4.30 pm. The office is based on the ground floor at the University Hospital of North Tees.

## Data Protection and use of patient information

The Trust has developed a Data Protection Policy in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All of our staff respect this policy and confidentiality is adhered to at all times. If you require further information please contact the Information Governance Team.

telephone: 01642 833551 or email: [information.governance@nth.nhs.uk](mailto:information.governance@nth.nhs.uk)

University Hospital of North Tees, Hardwick, Stockton-on-Tees. TS19 8PE  
University Hospital of Hartlepool, Holdforth Road, Hartlepool. TS24 9AH

Telephone: 01642 617617

Fax: 01642 624089