



**QUESTION |** WHAT ABOUT TREATMENT WITH ACUPUNCTURE FOR PAIN RELIEF AND ASSISTING IN MUSCLE STRENGTH PROGRAMMES? I'VE BEEN TREATING WITH THIS MODALITY FOR THE PAST 13 YEARS AND FIND IT EXTREMELY HELPFUL IN A LOT OF CASES, ALONG SIDE MORE CONVENTIONAL TREATMENTS. ANY THOUGHTS?

**ANSWER |** There is no doubt that acupuncture is widely used for the treatment of musculoskeletal conditions. There are differing thoughts as to why this may be an effective treatment. In its earliest form acupuncture dates back to a few centuries BC. From an Eastern Medicine perspective concepts such as wind, dampness, yin and yang and qi are pivotal in the practice of acupuncture, but generally not considered in Western evidence-based medicine.

Since the early 70's multiple randomised controlled trials and meta-analyses have been performed to evaluate the clinical efficacy of acupuncture. Often there are significant methodological problems with these studies. Whilst evidence exists for the control of emesis in pregnancy and surgery, as well as in the control of dental pain, data for chronic pain, chronic back pain and headache is more equivocal.

The 2008 Cochrane review included 35 RCT's. It concluded:

"Thirty-five RCTs covering 2861 patients were included in this systematic review. There is insufficient evidence to make any recommendations about acupuncture or dry-needling for acute low-back pain. For chronic low-back pain, results show that acupuncture is more effective for pain relief than no treatment or sham treatment, in measurements taken up to three months. The results also show that for chronic low-back pain, acupuncture is more effective for improving function than no treatment, in the short-term. Acupuncture is not more effective than other conventional and "alternative" treatments. When acupuncture is added to other conventional therapies, it relieves pain and improves function better than the conventional therapies alone. However, effects are only small. Dry-needling appears to be a useful adjunct to other therapies for chronic low-back pain."

The actions of acupuncture may be explained by reproducible physiological phenomena. These include stimulation of small diameter nerve fibres which stimulate central neurons in the spinal cord and brain to trigger endogenous opioid release. Functional MRI has also shown reproducible brain in relation to acupuncture. Dry needling, whilst not acupuncture per-se, may have a similar basis for effect. It may also have local effects by releasing local areas of muscle spasm seen with local trigger point formation.

Generally acupuncture appears to be a safe procedure. Minor adverse events may be seen with all needle based therapy (local bruising, skin infection), as well as complications from broken needles.

There does not appear to be any evidence for the use of acupuncture in muscle strength programs.

**- Dr Paul Annett - May 2010**

1. Acupuncture: Theory, Efficacy, and Practice *Ann Intern Med.* 2002;136:374-383.
2. Acupuncture and dry-needling for low back pain (Review) *The Cochrane Library* 2008, Issue 4