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The full report is titled “A Randomized Clinical Trial of Acupuncture Compared with Sham Acupuncture in Fibromyalgia.” It is in the 5 July 2005 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine* (volume 143, pages 10-19). The authors are N.P. Assefi, K.J. Sherman, C. Jacobsen, J. Goldberg, W.R. Smith, and D. Buchwald.

Acupuncture To Treat Fibromyalgia Pain

What is the problem and what is known about it so far?

Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes pain and tenderness in the head, shoulders, upper back, thighs, and abdomen. People with fibromyalgia also often have headaches, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and sleep problems. The cause of the condition is unknown. Fibromyalgia can be diagnosed when a person reports chronic, widespread pain and has tenderness to pressure at particular locations on the body. There are no specific laboratory tests for fibromyalgia. Although there have been studies of many types of treatments for fibromyalgia, none have proved to be highly effective. Many people with fibromyalgia seek alternative treatments, such as acupuncture. Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese treatment that involves the placement of special needles into specific points of the body to treat medical conditions. Increasingly, mainstream medicine is recognizing acupuncture as an effective treatment for a variety of disorders. Unfortunately, no studies prove that acupuncture helps patients with fibromyalgia. A common problem with previous studies has been the lack of good control groups. Patients knew whether they were getting true acupuncture, and this could have influenced the way they reported symptoms.

Why did the researchers do this particular study?

To see whether true acupuncture was more effective at treating fibromyalgia pain than sham (fake or pretend) acupuncture treatments.

Who was studied?

100 patients with fibromyalgia who had pain that they rated at least 4 on a scale from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain ever).

How was the study done?

The researchers assigned patients to 12 weeks of twice-weekly treatment with either true acupuncture for fibromyalgia or 1 of 3 comparison groups. All 3 comparison groups were a form of sham acupuncture. The first group got acupuncture at points used for the treatment of irregular menstrual periods, the second group had needles inserted at points that are not acupuncture points, and the third group got placement of special needle-like devices that did not pierce the skin. All patients could continue whatever other treatments they had been using for fibromyalgia before the study started. The researchers collected patient ratings of pain after 1, 4, 8, and 12 weeks of treatment and at 18 and 24 weeks after treatment was over.

What did the researchers find?

Patients who got true acupuncture had similar pain ratings to patients in the 3 sham acupuncture groups.

What were the limitations of the study?

The study may have been too small to detect small differences among the groups. Patients could continue other fibromyalgia therapies during the study, so this study applies to the use of acupuncture as an adjunct to other therapies.

What are the implications of the study?

In patients with fibromyalgia, adding 12 weeks of acupuncture treatment to the other treatments they were already using did not provide better pain relief than sham acupuncture.

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