

NIH-Funded Study Proves Accupuncture Beneficial

**May, 2009
Lyle Loughry**

According to a just-published study published in the May 11, 2009 *Archives of Internal Medicine*, acupuncture may be a godsend for those who suffer from chronic low back pain. The study, referred to as SPINE (Stimulating Points to Investigate Needling Efficacy), was the largest study of its kind ever, and showed that acupuncture helps with this condition even more than standard medical care. In fact, three different forms of acupuncture were tested, and all three beat out western medicine in helping relieve low back pain.

The studies were conducted on 638 adults who were patients at two nonprofit health plans, Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington, and Northern California Kaiser Permanente in Oakland. The SPINE trial was funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

All of the research subjects ranked their pain as a minimum of three on a scale of zero to 10 of "bothersome" discomfort. None of the participants had ever experienced acupuncture before participating in the study. They were randomly put into one of four groups for different kinds of treatment. All of them received standard medical care, but three of the groups also were treated with varying forms of acupuncture. Treatments involved needle puncture at points which were individualized for each case. Treatment was describes as standardized acupuncture using a single prescription of needle punctures at points on the back and back of the legs, and what the researchers called "simulated acupuncture" that involved pressing on points with a toothpick without penetrating the skin.

All participants in the three acupuncture groups were treated twice a week for three weeks, and then had weekly treatments for an additional month. The researchers re-tested back-related dysfunction, and measured any changes in the patients' symptoms at eight weeks, six months and 12 months. At the eighth week re-testing, all three acupuncture groups were functioning far better with less pain than the group getting only standard medical care. What's more, additional follow-ups found the benefits of acupuncture lasted for a year for many of these

people.

In a statement to the media, SPINE trial leader Daniel C. Cherkin, PhD, a senior investigator at Group Health Center for Health Studies in Seattle, said, "We found that simulated acupuncture, without penetrating the skin, produced as much benefit as needle acupuncture." Some would question the use of the term, "simulated acupuncture," because, while most forms of acupuncture studied by Western researchers do involve piercing the skin, the ancient healing therapy also includes non-piercing types of acupuncture.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) web site notes that acupuncture "describes a family of procedures involving the stimulation of anatomical points on the body using a variety of techniques." And "stimulation" does not necessarily equal actual "skin piercing." Cherkin's co-author, Karen J. Sherman, PhD, MPH, a senior investigator at Group Health Center for Health Studies, noted that, "Historically, some types of acupuncture have used non-penetrating needles. Such treatments may involve physiological effects that make a clinical difference."

Josephine P. Briggs, MD, director of NCCAM, noted that SPINE "..adds to the growing body of evidence that something meaningful is taking place during acupuncture treatments outside of actual needling. Future research is needed to delve deeper into what is evoking these responses."

For more information:

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/acupunc...>

<http://www.ghc.org/news/index.jhtml>