

Traditional Chinese Acupuncture May Be Effective for Osteoarthritis of Knee

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Oct. 20, 2004 (San Antonio) - Traditional Chinese acupuncture reduces knee pain and improves function for osteoarthritis patients, according to a 26-week, randomized controlled trial funded by the National Institutes of Health and reported yesterday at the annual scientific meeting of the American College of Rheumatology.

Lead investigator Marc C. Hochberg, MD, MPH, from the University Of Maryland School Of Medicine in Baltimore, presented data showing that patients treated with traditional acupuncture improved more than control groups given either a "sham" acupuncture treatment or an educational alternative. All 570 patients were told to continue using their analgesic or anti-inflammatory medications during the trial.

Average pain and function subscores on the Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index were 8.94 and 31.7, respectively, with no difference between treatment groups at baseline. Pain scores decreased by 3.79 points and function scores by 12.42 points for traditional acupuncture patients who completed 26 weeks of therapy. Control subjects receiving the sham treatment showed a more modest improvement: reductions of 2.92 points for pain and 9.87 for function.

The comparative changes in pain and function scores were statistically significant and "significantly better" than the outcomes for the education group, according to Dr. Hochberg. He noted that the educational alternative, Arthritis Self-Help Course, a 12-week series of two-hour group sessions, had previously been proven effective as an adjunct therapy.

The "sham" acupuncture consisted mostly of needles taped, instead of inserted, to specific points on a patient's body. Because all of the patients were new to acupuncture, Dr. Hochberg said, they did not know they were not receiving the traditional Chinese treatment for Bi syndrome, a diagnosis of knee pain.

Two thirds of the largely white population was women. Their average age was 65.5 years.

"Our study validates the efficacy and safety of traditional Chinese acupuncture as an adjunctive treatment for patients with symptomatic osteoarthritis of the knee," Dr. Hochberg told Medscape.

"It is part of the plethora of options available to the physician for treating his or her patient," he added, suggesting that it can be especially useful for patients who have a medical condition that precludes surgery. "I would say this study moves traditional Chinese acupuncture from the so-called list of unproven remedies the Arthritis Foundation used to have to the list of proven remedies."

A medical advisor for the Arthritis Foundation who participated in a description of acupuncture as unproven told Medscape the statement should be reconsidered and probably would be in light of the study. David T. Felson, MD, MPH, from the Boston University Medical Campus in Massachusetts, said, however, that the language is not likely to change considerably.

"This does provide new evidence that is important, and it would make sense for the Arthritis Foundation to reconsider," Dr. Felson said, but he described the effects of acupuncture as "really tiny" compared with the sham treatment in the study.

A current Arthritis Foundation statement describes acupuncture as "an accepted arthritis treatment in many parts of the world for arthritis and related conditions." It describes acupuncture as safe and says it is "probably worth a try, especially if other treatments aren't working for you."