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TREATMENT STORIES
When medicine makes the difference

ON PINS AND NEEDLES
Acupuncture shows mixed results with psoriatic arthritis
Acupuncture is becoming a pain relief option for some with psoriatic arthritis

By Martha Wagner

An estimated 3 million Americans use acupuncture for chronic pain and other conditions, such as psoriatic arthritis, every year. While there have been no formal studies examining if acupuncture relieves the pain of psoriatic arthritis, some practitioners and patients say it does help.

Kelly Olbekson, of Cheney, Wash., first tried acupuncture in 2010 and continues to undergo twice-weekly treatments for three to four consecutive weeks. She receives the treatment from her rheumatologist, who also is a licensed acupuncturist.

"I’m never pain-free," said Olbekson, 52, "but I do feel a lot better and more relaxed. It seems to release muscle tension."

Recent data analysis of acupuncture supports its value as an option for pain relief. Findings of the analysis, conducted by Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, were based on previous studies involving 18,000 patients.

An ancient practice

In acupuncture, hair-thin needles are inserted into the skin, releasing natural painkillers such as adenosine, endorphins and serotonin into the body.

People with psoriatic arthritis can benefit from the treatment, said San Francisco acupuncturist Rebecca Fettig, L.Ac., because "so many of them are put on drugs like methotrexate and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which have side effects, especially when taken long term, with potential damage to the liver and kidneys. The wonderful thing with acupuncture is there are no side effects."

Some patients may be concerned that acupuncture needles could worsen a skin flare-up. But, Fettig said, acupuncturists are careful to use sterile needles to prevent any risk to flaring skin, and practitioners have many points on the body to choose from.

UNLIKE THE MAJORITY OF ACUPUNCTURE PATIENTS, OLBEKSON FEELS PAIN WHEN HER ACUPUNCTURIST INSERTS THE NEEDLES UNDER HER SKIN, BUT SAID THE RESULTS OUTWEIGHT THE MOMENTARY DISCOMFORT OF THE TREATMENT. In addition to acupuncture treatment, she takes Chinese herbs, follows her doctor's recommended anti-inflammatory diet and also relies on sulfasalazine and sulfonamide to treat the pain.

Success story

Fettig specializes in autoimmune conditions and has treated many people for chronic pain associated with psoriatic arthritis and/or psoriasis. One of her success stories involves a man in his 50s who had psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis for more than 10 years. The patient had mild to moderate skin lesions and moderate arthritis pain, especially in his hands and knees. He occasionally took NSAIDs but was on no additional medication.

"Over the course of two months — 10 treatments — his psoriatic arthritis was under control and his pain was completely gone," Fettig said. "Within six months, Chinese herbal medicine, both topical and internal, improved his skin."

Fettig, a graduate of the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine who completed an internship in China, said that in her experience, this patient's results are fairly typical, although some patients respond well after just one or two treatments.

She's seen some improvement in all of her patients with arthritic conditions but adds that some cases can be more difficult than others, especially if a patient fails to make recommended dietary and lifestyle changes.

"Everyone’s condition is a bit different, and that’s something that Chinese medicine is very good for. It treats the individual, not the condition."

Patients may be young or old, energetic or lethargic, hot or cold, or having trouble with digestion or breathing, and those conditions must be treated differently from person to person.

"A medicine with solutions to diagnose and treat a patient accordingly is the most likely to produce good results," she said.

INTERESTED IN ACUPUNCTURE?

Roger Batchelor, L.Ac., who teaches classical Chinese acupuncture at the National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Ore., says that anyone concerned about safety should be assured acupuncture is safe. He advises those considering acupuncture to make sure a practitioner is certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine or that a medical doctor with certification has been practicing for several years. And for those without insurance coverage, it's worth considering lower-cost community acupuncture clinics or clinics at acupuncture colleges, Batchelor said.

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