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Can acupuncture help severe neck pain

Pain expert Dr. Scott Fishman answers questions about back pain:Q: My doctor has recently suggested acupuncture. Is acupuncture safe and will it really help?A: Acupuncture is one of the most time-tested treatments known to mankind. If the value of a treatment were based solely on how long it has been around, and how long people have thought that it was helpful, then acupuncture would probably be the most effective treatment known to humankind. Nonetheless, we still do not know why acupuncture works, how it works best, and for whom it is best used.Many patients advocate acupuncture as a very effective treatment for many different symptoms. These symptoms include pain from a variety of causes, as well as many other conditions including nausea, smoking cessation, problems with addiction, inflammatory conditions, possibly even anxiety and depression, to name just a few.There are many different forms of acupuncture. One form of acupuncture completed by one acupuncturist may be quite different than another, and any given practitioner may perform the acupuncture differently than another.Typically, acupuncture is performed with a very thin needle that causes gentle sensations. It is usually not painful. Classically, acupuncture involves using a needle - although sometimes electricity is passed through the needle, and sometimes the burning of traditional Chinese herbs is employed as well. Burning these herbs is called "moxabustion."The points that are used for the needle insertions often are at a distance from the actual area of symptoms. So, if someone has pain in their back, they may be getting needles in their feet, their ears or somewhere else distant from the actual site of the pain.The special points that are chosen for needle insertion are along areas called "meridians." These meridians relate to what the Ancient Chinese felt were true "organ systems" and guide the placement of the acupuncture needles." However, these "organ systems" are not necessarily the same kind of systems that are defined as traditional organ systems by 21st century physicians. For instance, the traditional meridians for the spleen may have nothing to do with the actual organ that we know of today. An acupuncturist traditionally diagnoses a patient's problem by feeling three pulses on each wrist. In some cases, these diagnostic indications determine which ancient meridians are and are not diseased.Taken all together, acupuncture is an ancient, time-tested form of therapy that seems to have exceptionally few side effects and appears to be safe for pain management. At present, however, it continues to be of unproven value for pain management in scientific circles. In my experience, many patients have found relief from pain through acupuncture. For those of my patients who have not found relief with standard medical therapies, I am always open-minded to any kind of treatment that will help, particularly those that have the fewest side effects. Thus, I embrace acupuncture. I look forward to revelations through science that better explain how it works and how it may be best applied to fight the war on pain. The ancient art of acupuncture has been practiced for centuries in Asia and has more recently spread to the United States and other Western countries. According to traditional Chinese beliefs, acupuncture works by affecting the flow of energy (called qi or chi), through 12 channels, or meridians, that run lengthwise through the body. Acupuncture involves the insertion of extremely fine needles into the skin at specific "acupoints" along the meridians. This action, some scientific evidence has shown, may result in pain relief by releasing endorphins, the body's natural painkilling chemicals, and may affect the part of the brain that governs serotonin levels, the brain transmitter involved with mood. During Chinese acupuncture, the acupuncturist may turn or twirl the needles slightly or apply heat or electrical stimulation to enhance the effects, or he or she may apply an herb called mugwort to the needle tips to further stimulate the designated acupoints; this is called moxibustion. A Japanese form of acupuncture involves more shallow needle insertion than Chinese acupuncture, and needles usually are not manipulated. Korean acupuncture focuses on needling points just in the hands and feet. Acupressure, on the other hand, does not involve the insertion of needles but substitutes deep pressure, usually with a finger or thumb, at acupressure points. Acupuncture has been used to treat most pain conditions, including low back pain, shingles and other nerve pain, hand and knee pain, headaches, fibromyalgia, and menstrual pain. What will happen at your first appointment with an acupuncturist Generally, the acupuncturist will start by interviewing you about your pain and other symptoms, ask about your medical and family history, and perform a full-body examination—including checking your tongue, taking your pulse, and pressing on various parts of your body to identify swelling or sensitivity. Acupuncturists use a holistic approach. Therefore, the treatment will likely address general constitutional (whole-body) imbalances as well as your specific complaint. The acupuncturist typically inserts four to 10 needles and leaves them in place for 10 to 30 minutes while you rest. A usual course of treatment includes six to 12 sessions over a three-month period. The complication rate for acupuncture appears to be quite low. A review of complications reported in medical journals found that the most common serious problem was accidental insertion of a needle into the pleural space between the lungs and the chest wall. Skin infections have also been reported. The advent of single-use, sealed needle packages has all but eliminated the risks of blood-borne infection such as hepatitis B or HIV. Evidence-based results vs the placebo effect Some of the pain relief acupuncture provides may actually be a placebo effect, in which the expectation of benefit brings about the desired result. Generally, scientific studies account for the placebo effect by comparing a group of participants who receive an active treatment with another group who get a dummy treatment (that is, a placebo). This is difficult with a procedure like acupuncture, because sticking little needles into people is hard to fake. But some studies have been able to compare actual acupuncture with approaches that mimic the procedure (for example, the needles touch but do not pierce the skin, or they pierce the skin in places that are not on a meridian). A study published in 2012 in Archives of Internal Medicine pooled results of 29 studies, involving nearly 18,000 people, of acupuncture for chronic pain (including back and neck pain, osteoarthritis, chronic headaches, and shoulder pain). Some of the studies compared acupuncture to simulated acupuncture, and some compared acupuncture to no acupuncture. In both types of studies, true acupuncture provided the greatest pain relief. Differences between actual and sham acupuncture suggest that the effect of acupuncture is more than just placebo. Looking for the right acupuncturist If you decide to try acupuncture, it is crucial to seek out an experienced acupuncturist. Licensing requirements vary from state to state. In states with no licensing requirements, the safest way to find a qualified acupuncturist is to seek one with certification from the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. The typical cost of an acupuncture session ranges from \$65 to \$125. Private insurers usually don't pay for it, nor do Medicare and Medicaid. Image: AGL Photography/iStock As a service to our readers, Harvard Health Publishing provides access to our library of archived content. Please note the date of last review or update on all articles. No content on this site, regardless of date, should ever be used as a substitute for direct medical advice from your doctor or other qualified clinician. Many people experience neck pain or stiffness from injury, overuse, or inflammation. There are many treatment options available for neck pain, depending on what is causing it.The neck consists of seven vertebrae. These are interlocking bones, separated by disks, that enable movement and stability.The neck is less protected than the rest of the spine. For this reason, it may be more prone to injury or conditions that cause pain.Many cases of neck pain are mild and will resolve on their own within a few days. Sometimes, however, neck pain can be a sign of something more serious.This article will discuss different causes of neck pain and how to treat them.There are many possible causes of neck pain, including:Muscle strainShare on PinterestA possible cause of neck pain is muscle strain.Straining the neck muscles can cause soreness in the area. This soreness might present as an aching or throbbing pain.It can also cause a sharp pain, especially when moving the head.Muscle strain can occur as a result of:having bad posturesleeping in a position without good neck supportstitting at a desk or computer for too longCervical spondylosisCervical spondylosis, or cervical disk degeneration, refers to when the disks between the neck's vertebrae wear down.This increases friction between the vertebrae and can cause pain and stiffness in the neck as a result.These disks typically wear down over time, so cervical spondylosis becomes more common with age.The disk can also begin to bulge out and put pressure on the spinal cord or its nerve roots. This degenerative process may worsen, leading to a herniated cervical disk fragment. This can fully push against nerve tissue to cause significant neck pain that may also radiate to the shoulder and down one or both arms.InjuryThe neck is flexible and constantly supporting the head. This makes it particularly susceptible to injury.Examples of possible neck injury causes include:motor vehicle accidentsimpact sports, such as footballfallsdivingweightliftingDamage to a muscle or ligament usually causes neck injuries.In more severe cases, injury can lead to a broken neck. This is occurs when one or more of the vertebrae becomes fractured.A broken neck can cause severe pain that may spread to other areas of the spinal cord. It also increases the risk of further injury to the spinal cord and loss of neurological function, including paralysis.Cervical radiculopathyCervical radiculopathy involves a pinched nerve. This occurs when a nerve root from the spinal cord in the neck becomes irritated or compressed. This gives rise to radiating pain from the neck to the shoulder and upper extremity.It can also cause muscle weakness, numbness, and a tingling sensation through the arms or hands.Other conditions, such as arthritis, can also lead to cervical radiculopathy, as can injuries resulting in a herniated cervical disk.Spinal stenosisSpinal stenosis refers to the narrowing of the spinal canal that puts pressure on nerve roots. This narrowing usually occurs in the neck or lower back.People with spinal stenosis can experience pain in their neck, back, or legs. The pain is usually worse with activity, but sometimes, posturing the neck in a certain way can relieve the discomfort.Osteoarthritis typically causes spinal stenosis. Other causes of this condition include spinal tumors, birth defects, and Paget's disease.MeningitisShare on PinterestA person with meningitis may experience neck stiffness.Meningitis refers to inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. An infection, such as from bacteria or a virus, can cause this inflammation to occur.Bacterial meningitis can be serious and sometimes life threatening. If any of the following symptoms arise, immediate medical attention is necessary:neck stiffnessfeverheadachenauseavomitingsensitivity to lightCancerHead and neck cancers can cause pain in the neck. These forms of cancer make up about 4% of all cases of cancer in the United States.There are several different types of head and neck cancers, including:Other symptoms of head and neck cancers include:mouth soresgrowths on the head or neckvoice changestrouble breathingjaw painfeverfatigueweight lossThere are many ways to ease neck pain at home, including by:taking over-the-counter pain relief medication, such as acetaminophen (also called Tylenol)placing warm or cold packs on the neck to reduce pain symptomsavoiding contact sports and heavy liftingseeing a physical therapistdoing gentle neck stretcheskeeping good postureengaging in light exercises, such as yogausing supportive neck pillows for sleepThere are also many different neck exercises that can help relieve pain. To try a simple exercise for the neck:Stand up or sit in a chair with the feet flat on the floor, around shoulder width apart.Slowly turn the head to the right until feeling a gentle stretch. Be careful to avoid stretching too far and causing further pain. Hold this position for 10-30 seconds.Turn the head to the left and hold for 10-30 seconds.Repeat these steps up to five times on each side.For more serious cases of neck pain, a doctor may recommend corticosteroid injections or surgery.Share on PinterestRegular exercise can help keep joints loose and flexible.Some tips to prevent neck pain or injury include:practicing good posture, especially when sitting at a desk or looking at a computersleeping on a supportive mattress and pillowregularly exercising to keep joints loose and flexiblereading a seatbelt while in the carnot diving into shallow waterwearing suitable protective gear during sports or exercisesIn most cases, neck pain will go away on its own. However, it is important to see a doctor if the following symptoms occur:neck pain following a motor vehicle accident, fall, or diving accidentpain, numbness, or weakness that spreads to the arms and legsbowel or bladder problemssevere or worsening painsevere headache with neck pain or stiffnesssigns of feversnausea and vomitinga lump in the neck or headNeck pain is common and tends to go away on its own within a few days.Poor posture and muscle strain or tension are some common causes of neck pain.Some people will have more severe neck pain, sometimes with additional symptoms that occur in nearby areas. This could be a sign of something more serious. In these cases, it is essential to see a doctor.

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