

Acupuncture reduces hot flashes, improves sex drive for breast cancer patients

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Not only is acupuncture as effective as drug therapy at reducing hot flashes in breast cancer patients, it has the added benefit of potentially increasing a woman's sex drive and improving her sense of well-being, according to a Henry Ford Hospital study.

Study results show that acupuncture, when compared to drug therapy, has a longer-lasting effect on the reduction of [hot flashes](#) and night sweats for women receiving [hormone therapy](#) for [breast cancer](#) treatment. Women also report that acupuncture improves their energy and clarity of thought.

The study, published online this week in the Journal of Oncology, is the first randomly controlled trial to compare acupuncture and drug therapy in this way.

"Acupuncture offers patients a safe, effective and durable treatment option for hot flashes, something that affects the majority of breast cancer survivors. Compared to drug therapy, acupuncture actually has benefits, as opposed to more side effects," says study lead author Eleanor Walker, M.D., division director of breast services in the Department of Radiation Oncology at Henry Ford Hospital.

According to the National Cancer Institute, one in eight women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime. For these women, conventional medical treatment involves chemotherapy and five years of hormone therapy. With such a long course of treatment, side effects of hormone

therapy such as vasomotor symptoms - hot flashes and night sweats - can become a major cause of decreased quality of life, and even discontinuation of treatment.

Venlafaxine (Effexor) has been the drug therapy of choice to manage these common and debilitating side effects associated with breast cancer treatment. Venlafaxine, however, comes with its own set of side-effects: dry mouth, decreased appetite, nausea and constipation.

Since acupuncture has been shown to effectively reduce hot flashes in [menopausal women](#), Dr. Walker and her research team decided to test the use of acupuncture to combat vasomotor symptoms in breast cancer patients as an alternative to drug therapy.

To compare the two options, 50 patients were recruited from oncology clinics at Henry Ford. Patients were randomly assigned to receive either acupuncture or venlafaxine treatment for 12 weeks. The drug therapy group took venlafaxine orally each night, 37.5mg the first week and then 75mg for the remaining 11 weeks. The other group received acupuncture treatments twice per week for the first four weeks, and then once a week for the remaining eight weeks.

At the end of 12 weeks, all patients stopped their therapy and were followed for one year. Patients kept a diary to record the number and severity of hot flashes, and took surveys to measure their overall health and mental health.

The study found that both groups initially experienced a 50 percent decline in hot flashes and depressive symptoms, indicating that acupuncture is as effective as drug therapy.

Differences, however, between the two groups began to emerge two weeks post-treatment: The acupuncture group continued to experience

minimal hot flashes, while the [drug therapy](#) group had a significant increase in hot flashes. The [acupuncture](#) group did not experience an increase in the frequency of their hot flashes until three months post-treatment.

More information: "Acupuncture versus Venlafaxine for the Management of Vasomotor Symptoms in Hormone Receptor Positive Breast Cancer Patients: A Randomized Controlled Trial." Journal of Clinical Oncology.

Provided by Henry Ford Health System

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