

Acupuncture is equally effective with simulated needles

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sometimes referred to as placebo - is just as beneficial as real acupuncture for treating nausea in cancer patients undergoing radiotherapy, according to a study from Karolinska Institutet and Linköping University in Sweden. Patients, who received only standard care including medications for nausea, felt significantly more nausea than patients in both the acupuncture groups.

"The beneficial effects seem not to come from the traditional acupuncture method, but probably from the patients' positive expectations and the extra care that the treatment entails," says Anna Enblom, physiotherapist and researcher at the Osher Centre for Integrative Medicine at Karolinska Institutet. "The patients communicated with the physiotherapists administering the acupuncture, received tactile stimulation and were given extra time for rest and [relaxation](#)."

The study, which is published in the scientific journal [PLoS ONE](#), included 277 patients at Linköping and Lund university hospitals and Karolinska University Hospital in Solna, all of whom were undergoing radiotherapy of the abdomen or pelvic region for cancer. A selection of 215 patients from this group, were blindly assigned traditional or simulated acupuncture. The former group (109 patients) had needles inserted into their skin to stimulate certain points, and the latter (106 patients) had blunt telescopic placebo needles merely pressed against the skin. The acupuncture patients were then compared with 62 patients who had only received the standard care regime with medications for nausea

and no acupuncture.

The results show that the patients who had received genuine or simulated acupuncture felt much less nauseous than those who had received standard care only. Of the patients who had had some form of acupuncture, only 37 felt [nausea](#) and seven per cent vomited, compared with 63 per cent and 15 per cent of the standard care group. However, no differences were observed between the two acupuncture groups, despite the fact that the [placebo](#) needle was applied to the skin for a total of only two minutes during the entire five-week treatment period.

The patients' expectations seemed to be important for the effect: 81 per cent of those who expected to feel ill did so, in contrast to only 50 per cent of those who did not.

"It's important to remember that the effects of the treatment are valuable to the patients, even if they can be said to have been caused by unspecific factors, such as the manner in which the patients were taken care of and their positive expectations," says Dr Enblom. "So our next step is to study which part of the [acupuncture](#) procedure actually are of importance, to make possible the use of those components to further increase quality of care."

More information: 'Getting the Grip on Nonspecific Treatment Effects: Emesis in Patients Randomized to Acupuncture or Sham Compared to Patients Receiving Standard Care', Anna Enblom, Mats Lekander, Mats Hammar, Anna Johnsson, Erik Onelöv, Martin Ingvar, Gunnar Steineck & Sussanne Börjeson, PLoS ONE, online 23 March 2011. dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0014766

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