



160 Allen Street, Rutland, VT 05701

802.747.3633 802.747.6223 fax

## **Acupuncture for Chronic Pain**

by Arabella Bull-Stewart, DO

The National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complimentary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) division finds that more than 30 percent of adults in the United States use health care approaches developed outside of mainstream Western medicine<sup>1</sup>. Complementary and alternative therapies are so widely used today that the National Institutes of Health created the NCCIH specifically to study these interventions.

The use of complementary and alternative therapies is of particular interest in the area of chronic pain. According to a 2014 JAMA Internal Medicine article, a quarter of people seeking primary health care have chronic pain<sup>2</sup>. With significant rates of overdose and death resulting from the misuse of opioids, alternative therapies such as acupuncture and osteopathic manipulative treatment are being studied as options.

The Acupuncture Trialists' Collaboration reviewed 29 high-quality randomized controlled trials, which studied the use of acupuncture for back and neck pain, osteoarthritis, shoulder pain, and chronic headache. The researchers found that acupuncture is "clinically relevant", and is a "reasonable referral option for patients with chronic pain"<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, research published in the Annals of Internal medicine and cited by the American College of Physicians has endorsed acupuncture as a potential treatment option for patients with chronic low back pain, stating that "Acupuncture effectively relieves chronic low back pain."<sup>4</sup>

Acupuncture involves the insertion of fine needles into defined points on the skin to generate a therapeutic effect, and has been used for more than 2,500 years in China to treat a variety of medical conditions, including pain. Since its primary introduction to the United States in 1972 (after President Nixon's visit to China), Western studies suggest acupuncture stimulates release of the body's own pain relieving substances, increases blood flow, and has anti-inflammatory effects<sup>5</sup>.

Osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT) involves hands on diagnosis and treatment of injury. During treatment, muscles and joints are manipulated to promote realignment, and decrease pain. The NCCIH sites 2007 guidelines<sup>6</sup> in which the American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society "included spinal manipulation as one

<sup>1</sup> <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health>, accessed on 9/14/2015

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J. Vickers, DPhil1; Klaus Linde, MD2 . Acupuncture for Chronic Pain. JAMA. 2014;311(9):955-956. doi:10.1001/jama.2013.285478.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nccih.nih.gov/research/results/spotlight/091012>, accessed on 9/14/2015

<sup>4</sup> <http://annals.org/article.aspx?articleid=718336>, accessed on 9/14/2015

<sup>5</sup> Berman BM, Langevin HM, Witt, CM, Dubner R. Acupuncture for Chronic Low Back Pain. N Eng J Med July 2010; 363;5: 454-461.

<sup>6</sup> <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/pain/spinemanipulation.htm>, accessed on 9/14/2015



# Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation

*A Department of Rutland Regional Medical Center*

Michael J. Kenosh, MD

*Medical Director*

Arabella Bull-Stewart, DO

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of several treatment options for practitioners to consider when low-back pain does not improve with self-care.” A 2010 Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality report states that “manipulation was significantly better than placebo or no treatment in reducing pain”<sup>7</sup>.

Acupuncture and OMT are important options to discuss with your practitioner for treatment of chronic pain, especially in light of the potential misuse of medication and side effects of other treatments. There are side effects associated with acupuncture and OMT, although rare, and their use should be discussed with your health care provider prior to starting treatment.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ahrq.gov/research/findings/evidence-based-reports/backcam2tp.html>, accessed 9/14/15