



What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the practice of inserting thin needles into specific points in the body. It is sometimes done with manual or electrical stimulation.

There are two approaches to acupuncture which sometimes overlap. Traditional Chinese acupuncture is based on a belief that the needles stimulate energy flow in the body. Western medical acupuncture adapts the traditional Chinese approach and applies a scientific method to understand and explain its effects. Ask your physiotherapist which method they use.

Acupuncture produces changes in nerves, muscles, connective tissue (fascia), hormones and circulation. By stimulating specific points, acupuncture releases the body's own painkillers: endorphin and serotonin.

Acupuncture impacts the muscular, skeletal, neurological, digestive, respiratory, urinary and reproductive systems.

Acupuncture is most effective when used in combination with exercise therapy, traditional physiotherapy and medication. It should be used in combination with other physiotherapy treatments.

What conditions does acupuncture treat?

Research shows that acupuncture is useful in the treatment of:

- Painful muscle conditions and injuries (e.g., shoulder pain and ankle sprains)
- Hip and knee osteoarthritis
- Neck pain
- Chronic low back pain
- Headaches (migraine and tension)
- Fibromyalgia
- Pelvic and low back pain in pregnancy
- Pain during labour

Acupuncture can also be used to treat:

- Cancer-related fatigue
- Multiple sclerosis
- Parkinson's disease
- Dry mouth (often a side-effect of chemotherapy)
- Stroke

What should I expect from treatment?

The number and location of needles used will vary based on your condition and treatment goals. Some notice the effects of treatment on their first visit, while others may need 5-8 treatments to see better results.

Your physiotherapist will regularly check your progress to ensure acupuncture is helping you.

Are there any complications associated with acupuncture?

Yes. Any technique that punctures skin has a risk of complications. It is important you know the risks before treatment.

Common, mild complications that usually resolve on their own include:

- Pain with needle insertion or movement
- Bleeding or bruising at the needle site
- Post treatment drowsiness or fatigue

Less common complications that range from mild to significant include:

- Dizziness
- Extreme drowsiness or fatigue
- Forgotten needle
- Fainting
- Nausea
- Post-treatment pain or nerve irritation
- Emotional reaction

Sometimes, serious complications that may require attention from other health-care providers may occur, including:

- Breakage of needle within the body
- Infection
- Puncture of vital tissue (a puncture of lung tissue causing it to collapse, also known as a pneumothorax)

Can the risks of complications be reduced?

To reduce the risk of complications:

- Eat before your appointment
- Show up well rested to your appointment
- Tell your physiotherapist if you have any concerns, including past experiences where you have fainted from receiving a needle
- Let your physiotherapist know if you experience pain, dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath or if you are feeling unwell
- Follow your physiotherapist's advice about positioning and movement during and after treatment
- Inform your physiotherapist of any changes to medications such as blood thinners or pain relievers

Communicate with your physiotherapist throughout treatment. Discuss your treatment and ensure your questions are answered. You can request, at any time, that your physiotherapist stop needling.

Would a different treatment work?

Acupuncture is one of many techniques that your physiotherapist may use. Discuss the benefits and risks of acupuncture and other available treatments with your physiotherapist. For some, such as those with needle fear or a history of fainting, an alternative treatment might be a better option.

Do all physiotherapists perform acupuncture?

No. Physiotherapists who perform dry needling (including acupuncture) have completed training in addition to their university education. They have also received approval to perform needling from their regulatory body (Physiotherapy Alberta - College + Association) and must adhere to safe practice standards.