

Acupuncture Helps Kids and Teens with Chronic Pain

By [L.A. McKeown](#)

WebMD Medical News Archive

April 26, 2000 -- Young people who suffer from medical conditions that cause chronic pain may get relief from an age-old Chinese tradition: acupuncture. Children and teenagers who have undergone treatment with acupuncture say the tiny needles placed at certain points on the skin ease pain with little discomfort.

Although some young people said they were scared at first or thought it was "weird," the majority of kids and their parents who were asked about their acupuncture experiences via a telephone survey had more positive comments than negative ones. Researchers from Children's Hospital in Boston, who report the results of the survey in the journal *Pediatrics*, say pediatricians should consider acupuncture as a treatment option, at least for some children with severe, chronic pain.

Acupuncture involves placing tiny needles just under the surface of the skin at certain points on the body. Some acupuncturists say they do not know why acupuncture works -- just that it does. Others believe the therapy stimulates *Chi*, or *Qi*, the vital energy that practitioners of Chinese medicine believe is central to maintaining and controlling bodily functions.

Adherents say the invisible *Chi* flows throughout the body through a series of channels known as meridians, as well as in the blood. Acupuncturists place the needles at various points along the meridians to promote a healthy flow of *Chi*. Sometimes, the needles are warmed by touching one or more of them with a smoldering Chinese herb; other times they are turned or twisted slightly by hand to stimulate these points.

When asked what they did not like about acupuncture treatments, the young people and their families mentioned an initial fear of the needles. Although most said they overcame the fear, the researchers say acupuncture can be performed successfully using other methods without needles. These include cupping, in which a warmed glass is placed on the skin to relieve muscle tension through suction; and the use of magnets on various areas of the body, including in the ears.

The 47 young people in the survey ranged in age from 5 to 20 years and underwent acupuncture an average of eight times over three months. Their reasons for needing acupuncture included migraine headaches, the painful gynecologic condition known as endometriosis, and burning nerve pain associated with reflex sympathetic dystrophy.

Seventy percent of the young people and 59% of their parents reported improvement in pain symptoms. Some also mentioned that acupuncture seemed to help with relaxation.

Norbert Weidner, MD, a licensed acupuncturist who uses the therapy at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, says pre-teens and teen-agers usually are better candidates for acupuncture than younger children because they are more likely to be able to understand the concepts involved.

"Often what I do is show them the needles and let them hold the needle," Weidner tells WebMD. "Sometimes I will place it on my body, usually my hand, to show them as I'm talking to them that the placement is very easy and that once it is placed, I can still talk and move my hand." With young children, he describes the sensation of the needles as feeling "like a mosquito that lands on you and is more annoying, [rather] than something that is actually painful."

Edward A. Weiss, MD, a licensed acupuncturist in private practice in Palo Alto, Calif., says that when introducing children to acupuncture, it often helps if they accompany a parent for a

treatment and see for themselves that little discomfort is involved. "Another way is just to say, 'Let's try this, you are in control and if you don't like it, we'll stop,'" Weiss says.

The researchers say more studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of acupuncture in relieving children's pain.

Vital Information:

- According to a recent survey, acupuncture can be an effective option for children and teenagers who are experiencing chronic pain.
- Some youths were scared initially or thought the procedure was weird, but many overcame these feelings and reported improved pain symptoms.
- Acupuncture usually involves placing needles under the surface of the skin, but other approaches use a warmed glass or magnets placed on certain areas of the body.