

## Acupuncture Helps Relieve Pregnancy's Low Back Pain

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July 6, 2000 -- For low back pain during pregnancy, acupuncture may be better than traditional treatment with massage, heat, and exercise, according to a Swedish report in a recent issue of the journal *Acta Obstetricia et Gynecologica Scandinavica*.

"I'm happy to say that I was wrong about acupuncture," says lead study author Kaj Wedenberg, MD, PhD, the assistant chief of Ob-Gyn at Central Hospital in Vasteras, Sweden. "This preliminary study showed that acupuncture can reduce low back pain and disability in just a few simple treatments."

Low back pain affects up to three-quarters of all pregnant women, usually during the time between their sixth and ninth months of pregnancy. The cause is not yet known, but risk factors include smoking, strenuous work, and a history of low back problems. Symptoms are usually worse in the evening, can often affect sleep, and can interfere with a woman's ability to perform daily tasks -- even causing her to need time off from work.

Wedenberg and two nurse-midwives compared acupuncture to physical therapy in 60 pregnant women with low back pain. Over four to eight weeks, participants received 10 treatments of either acupuncture or physical therapy. Before, during, and after treatment, they rated their pain and disability on a scale of zero to 10.

The groups rated their low back pain similarly before treatment, but there were significant differences afterward. The acupuncture group had an average pain reduction of 2.5 points in the morning and six points in the evening, whereas the physical therapy group had a reduction of only 1.5 points in the morning and two points in the evening.

Similarly, there were significant differences in disability after treatment. The acupuncture group had less difficulty in performing 11 out of 12 daily activities, yet there were no changes reported by the physical therapy group.

"Acupuncture is a valid treatment for low back pain, but only after posture and proper body mechanics have been addressed," says Judy Fielder, CNM, MN, a nurse-midwife who practices in Atlanta. "And we usually recommend a support device that holds the uterus up and in, relieving stress on back muscles," she adds.

Doctors say acupuncture can also relieve nausea during pregnancy. "During the first six months, acupuncture is a safe and effective treatment for nausea and vomiting," says Truett Bridges, MD, a pain specialist and president of the Georgia Association of Medical Acupuncturists. "But you've got to be very careful with pregnant women, because some acupuncture points actually induce labor," he tells WebMD.

For this reason, Bridges supports the study researchers' use of ear acupuncture, rather than body acupuncture. "But I think a combination of acupuncture and physical therapy is probably the best approach," he tells WebMD. "And repeated massage works particularly well for low back pain."

### Vital Information:

- Low back pain affects up to three-quarters of all pregnant women, especially those who smoke, do strenuous work, or have a history of back problems.

- A new study shows that acupuncture may work better for low back pain in pregnant women than the conventional treatment with massage, heat, and exercise.
- There are special precautions to take with pregnant women, because experts say some acupuncture points can actually induce labor.