

Acupuncture for chronic pain: an update and critical overview

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Abstract

Purpose of review

Acupuncture is now recommended for several chronic pain conditions. Despite supportive evidence of its effectiveness, this ancient approach is often misunderstood, and may still be underused in mainstream practice. A critical review on its effectiveness and practice integration, and mechanisms of action is essential to the medical community that is continuing to seek nonopioid therapies for chronic pain.

Recent findings

Mounting evidence supports the effectiveness of acupuncture to treat chronic low back, neck, shoulder, and knee pain, as well as headaches. Additional data are emerging that support the use of acupuncture as an adjunct or alternative to opioids, and in perioperative settings. Findings related to its mechanisms of action include transient receptor potential cation channel vanilloid 1 activation in the periphery, microglial suppression in the cerebral cortex and spinal cord, and regulation of cytokines and other key inflammatory factors in the spinal cord. Incremental integration of acupuncture into pain medicine practices and training programmes continues to grow.

Summary

Acupuncture is effective, safe, and cost-effective for treating several chronic pain conditions when performed by well-trained healthcare professionals. Further studies on its use as an adjunct or alternative to opioids, and in perioperative settings are needed.

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