



Review article

Application of auricular acupoints therapy in relieving the gastrointestinal side effects induced by chemotherapy: an integrative review

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ABSTRACT

Background: It is an urgent matter to relieve the side effects induced by chemotherapy. In recent years, auricular acupoints therapy, which is a nursing technique used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), has been used on many patients who are undergoing chemotherapy without causing any side effects. Furthermore, it has a good efficacy and is inexpensive.

Aim: The aim of this study was to provide evidence for the need of further research in the treatment and nursing of patients during chemotherapy.

Methods: We conducted an integrated review of the reports in CNKI, WanFang Data, SinoMed, and PubMed databases for journal articles published after 1990. The search terms included *auricular acupoints taping and pressing*, *auricular acupoints therapy*, *auricular point sticking*, *ear points*, *chemotherapy*, and *side effects* and relevant Medical Subject Heading terms. We then analyzed the mechanism, acupoints, and operation method and summarized the application of auricular acupoints therapy in patients suffering from chemotherapy side effects.

Results: This review included 102 articles published between 1990 and 2016, and we brought 63 other articles into the study. Eighteen articles focused on auricular acupoints therapy, combined with other therapy, to relieve patient side effects during chemotherapy.

Conclusions: Auricular acupoints therapy can prevent and relieve the side effects induced by chemotherapy. It deserves further clinical applications.

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1. Introduction

Chemotherapy is an important method to treat tumors. Studies show that 70–80% of tumor patients need to undergo chemotherapy to increase its clinical curative effect.^{1,2} Chemotherapy can control the development of tumors, prevent tumor recurrence and metastasis,³ and prolong survival time for tumor patients.⁴ However, chemotherapy can also cause normal tissue damage while killing cancer cells, which means that chemotherapy side effects may occur. The side effects induced by chemotherapy seriously influence a patient's tolerance of and compliance with chemotherapy.

Gastrointestinal side effects are the most common side effects, affecting 75% of tumor patients.⁵ These side effects include nausea and vomiting, dyspepsia, hiccups, constipation, and oral ulcers. Therefore, relieving these chemotherapy side effects with effective nursing is an urgent matter. Presently, patients generally take drugs to relieve chemotherapy side effects, but drug therapy may cause new side effects. In addition, the efficacy for delayed vomiting by drug therapy is not obvious. The auricular acupoints therapy, which is a nursing technique used in TCM, has been used in recent years to treat patients during chemotherapy and presents no side effects. Furthermore, it has a good efficacy and is inexpensive. This study summarizes the operation method and the application of auricular acupoints therapy in patients suffering from the side effects of chemotherapy to provide evidence for further research in the treatment and nursing of patients during chemotherapy.

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2. A summary of auricular acupoints therapy

2.1. Definition

Auricular acupoints therapy is an external treatment method, which is developed on the basis of auricular acupuncture therapy. It needs to put the vaccaria seed on the auricular acupoints accurately, and make patients feel hot, anesthetic, distending-like and pain by kneading, tapping, pinching, pressing the acupoints.

2.2. The mechanism

2.2.1. The mechanism of chemotherapy drugs causing the gastrointestinal side effects

Because a chemotherapy course can last for an extended period of time, patients may become weak, and the function of their *zang* and *fu* (viscera) may become deficient. As an exogenous pathogenic factor, chemotherapy can injure the spleen and the stomach, disorder the *qi* and blood, disturb the transportation and transformation of the *spleen*, and impair the harmonious descending of the *stomach*. The *qing-qi* (lucid *qi*) is not ascending, and the turbid *qi* flows in reverse, which leads to nausea and vomiting.⁶ Hiccups are caused by the adverse rising of the stomach *qi*. Oral ulcers are caused by *fire* flames up.⁷

2.2.2. The mechanism of auricular acupoints therapy

Twelve meridians are on the flux in the ears, and each viscera is connected to the ears in our body. The application of auricular acupoints therapy, through stimulating certain auricular acupoints, is to activate the meridians and collaterals on the whole body and to regulate the function of the internal organs, *qi*, and blood to relieve the gastrointestinal side effects. The stomach acupoints balance the stomach *qi* and promotes antiemetic function. The *shenmen* acupoints work for sedation, tranquilization, and has some antiemetic effect, while the *jiaogan* acupoints adjust the autonomic nerve to relieve nausea and vomiting caused by the excitation of the vagus nerve. These acupoints are stimulated in patients to regulate and balance stomach *qi* and stop vomiting in patients.

2.3. The choice of acupoints and operation method

There are two principles on selecting acupoints: the main acupoints and supporting acupoints. Generally, it takes *Wangbuliuxing* (vaccariae) as the main drug beans; some learners also choose the magnetic beads. However, there is no uniform criterion of a specific method, such as the frequency of pressing and the duration of pressing.

2.3.1. The choice of auricular acupoints

Generally, the main acupoints include 3–5 acupoints, consisting of the *shenmen*, stomach, endocrine, spleen, *jiaogan*, and subcortical acupoints. Xiao⁸ studied the influence of auricular acupoints and defecation in patients during chemotherapy. He chose the *constipation point*, *large intestine*, *sub rectum*, *triple energizer* (*san-jiao*), and *lung* acupoints as the main acupoints. Zhang⁹ et al state that the *cardia* acupoint is the key point for antiemetic; therefore, they chose the *cardia* acupoint as the main acupoint. The choice of the distribution should be based on the result of the syndrome differentiation.

2.3.2. Operation method (Table 1)

2.4. Criteria of curative effect

The WHO classification of standard chemotherapy drug toxicity reaction was mostly chosen. This classification divides the symptoms of nausea and vomiting into the following degrees: degree 0 (no nausea or vomiting), degree I (nausea with no influence on diet and daily life), degree II (minimal vomiting with some influence on diet and daily life), degree III (vomiting needing treatment and obvious influence on diet and daily life), and degree IV (frequent vomiting causing an inability to eat). After treatment, if a patient is classified as degree 0 or I, the treatment is considered to have a good effect. If a patient is classified as degree II, the treatment is considered effective. If a patient is classified as degree III or IV, the treatment is considered ineffective. However, some learners¹⁹ choose the National Cancer Institute Common Toxicity Events Standard (NCI-CTCAE) as the evaluation parameter.

Table 1
The method of auricular acupoints therapy.

Authors	Frequency of pressing	Duration of pressing	Intension of pressing	Start time	End time	Effective rate/%	Ear or ears
Liu ¹⁰	More than 3 times/d	1–2 min	Sour, anesthesia, sinking, distension, pain	30 min before chemotherapy	End of chemotherapy	92.0	Ear
Zhang ¹¹	1 time/20 min; pressing when patients want to vomit	5 min	Anesthesia, pain	30 min before chemotherapy	Not given	90.8	Not given
Jin ¹²	3 times/d	10–20 s	Distension, pain, burning	1 day before chemotherapy or when chemotherapy starts	4–6 day after treatment	72.4	Not given
You ¹³	3–5 times/d	1–2 min	Sour, anesthesia heat, distension, pain	Not given	Not given	Not given	Ear
Xie ¹⁴	3 times/d	2 min	Distention, heat, pain	Day when chemotherapy was received	End of chemotherapy	94.7	Ears
Sun ¹⁵	3–5 times/d	1–2min	Sour, heat, distension, pain	30 min before chemotherapy	End of chemotherapy	85.0	Ear
Li ¹⁶	1 times/4 h	1–2min	Sour, anesthesia, distension, pain, heat	30 min before chemotherapy	End of chemotherapy	90.5	Not given
Qin ¹⁷	3–5 times/d	3 min	Pain	1 day before chemotherapy	5 days	90.0	Ears
Han ¹⁸	3–4 times/d	3–5min	Sour, anesthesia heat, slight pain	30 min before chemotherapy	1 week	97.5	Ear

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