

Author's Accepted Manuscript

ACUPUNCTURE MAY BE EFFECTIVE FOR PREVENTION OF TENSION-TYPE HEADACHE, BUT MAGNITUDE OF IMPROVEMENT MAY BE SMALL COMPARED TO SHAM

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PII: S1550-8307(16)30253-1
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2016.12.015>
Reference: JSCH2175

To appear in: *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*

Cite this article as: Richard Glickman-Simon, ACUPUNCTURE MAY BE EFFECTIVE FOR PREVENTION OF TENSION-TYPE HEADACHE, BUT MAGNITUDE OF IMPROVEMENT MAY BE SMALL COMPARED TO SHAM, *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2016.12.015>

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SECTION HEAD: Evidence-based Integrative Medicine Updates

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Acupuncture may be effective for prevention of tension-type headache, but magnitude of improvement may be small compared to sham

Level 2 [mid-level] evidence

Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2016 Apr 19;(4):CD007587

Tension-type headache is the most common kind of primary headache worldwide,¹ with a lifetime prevalence of 30 – 78%.² The burden of suffering imposed by tension-type headaches (TTH) largely depends on their frequency. Episodic TTH is considered frequent when it occurs on 1 - 15 days per month. If the frequency increases to > 15 days, it is considered chronic TTH.³ As headache frequency increases, so do the risks associated with the overuse of abortive analgesics, such as rebound headaches.⁴ Electromyographic biofeedback and amitriptyline may be separately beneficial for reducing the frequency of TTH.^{5,6} Acupuncture has been used for the management of TTH for centuries in China and, more recently, has become popular in Western countries as well.⁷ Notwithstanding its popularity, two previous systematic reviews found no clear distinction between acupuncture and sham for the reduction of TTH frequency.^{8,9}

In the present systematic review, researchers analyzed 12 randomized controlled trials investigating the effectiveness of acupuncture for preventing frequent episodic or chronic TTH in 2,349 adults.³ Treatment response was defined as a $\geq 50\%$ reduction in headache frequency. Number of weekly treatment sessions ranged from 6 to 15 and the follow-up period lasted from 8 to 24 weeks. Five of the trials were at high risk of performance or detection bias due to non-blinding, and 10 trials were additionally at unknown risk for selection, reporting and/or attrition bias.

Compared to a sham control, acupuncture was associated with increased pooled response rate at 3-4 months [risk ratio (RR) = 1.27 (95% CI 1.09-1.48, NNT 5-26) in analysis of 4 trials with 703 patients] and at 5-6 months [RR = 1.17 (95% CI 1.02-1.35, NNT 6-107) in analysis of 4 trials with 723 patients]. Acupuncture was also associated with fewer headache days during the same time windows: mean difference (MD) = -1.62

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