

# Oncology Acupuncture for Chronic Pain in Cancer Survivors

## A Reflection on the American Society of Clinical Oncology Chronic Pain Guideline



Weidong Lu, MB, MPH, PhD\*, David S. Rosenthal, MD

### KEYWORDS

• Oncology acupuncture • ASCO practice guideline • Chronic pain • Cancer survivors

### KEY POINTS

- Acupuncture is recommended by the American Society of Clinical Oncology practice guideline for chronic pain in adult cancer survivors.
- Recent randomized clinical trials of acupuncture demonstrated favorable benefits for reducing chronic pain related to chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, radiotherapy and surgery.
- Oncology acupuncture is a new subspecialty of cancer supportive care.

### INTRODUCTION

Cancer-related pain is one of most common but difficult to manage symptoms, whether it occurs during or after the completion of cancer treatment. It is reported that 40% to 85% of patients with cancer experience pain.<sup>1,2</sup> Cancer pain frequently occurs at different stages of the cancer journey: 25% in newly diagnosed patients, 33% in patients receiving anticancer treatment, and up to 75% in later stage of cancers.<sup>2</sup> With earlier cancer diagnosis and advances in cancer treatment, more patients are living longer. It is estimated that more than 15 million cancer survivors are currently living in the United States, which reflects an historically high survival rate.<sup>3</sup> However, cancer survivors often have physical, social, and emotional issues that seriously affect their quality of life. Among these issues are chronic pain, which continues to be a major medical issue.<sup>4</sup>

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [weidong\\_lu@dfci.harvard.edu](mailto:weidong_lu@dfci.harvard.edu)

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In general, cancer pain is caused by 2 major factors:

1. Tumor growth and tumor compression-related pain usually is the major cause, especially for patients with active disease; and
2. Pain related to the therapy, whether it is chemotherapy-related, hormonal therapy-related, radiation-related, stem cell transplantation-mediated, or surgery-related pain. In cancer survivors, chronic pain associated with these therapies is very relevant.

In 2016, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) published a chronic pain related practice guideline, *Management of Chronic Pain in Survivors of Adult Cancers*.<sup>5</sup> It is the first ASCO guideline for chronic pain in cancer survivors. The guideline recommends that clinicians be aware of chronic pain syndromes resulting from cancer treatments, acknowledge the prevalence of these pain syndromes, the risk factors for individual patients, and know appropriate treatment options. A list of common cancer pain syndromes is presented in the guideline.<sup>5</sup> The guideline strongly recommends that clinicians either prescribe directly or refer patients to other professionals to provide the nonpharmacologic interventions available to mitigate chronic pain or improve pain-related outcomes. These nonpharmacologic interventions include:

1. Physical medicine and rehabilitation;
2. Integrative therapies;
3. Interventional therapies;
4. Psychological approaches; and
5. Neurostimulatory therapies.

“There is no compelling data to recommend one therapy over another,” as is pointed out in the guideline. With modest strength of evidence and various methodologic limitations of these therapies, the guideline recognizes that these therapies have minimal side effects and the selection of these therapies may be based on patients and family goals, potential toxicities, ability of participation, and cost.<sup>5</sup>

Acupuncture, a major component of integrative therapies, along with massage and music therapy, is recommended by the ASCO guideline for chronic pain in cancer survivors. In the past 20 years, integrative oncology, a branch of integrative medicine, has emerged. It combines complementary therapies with conventional mainstream oncology care.<sup>6–9</sup> Clinical trial-generated evidence has shown that acupuncture is safe and effective as an adjunctive treatment for managing cancer-related symptoms.<sup>10–12</sup> However, despite thousands of years of practice outside of the conventional medical system, acupuncture use as an adjunctive therapy within a mainstream oncology setting presents an entirely new challenge.

Oncology acupuncture, a new breed of acupuncture, has emerged as a specialty in cancer symptom management.<sup>13</sup> This review focuses on randomized clinical trials of acupuncture used to treat chronic pain in cancer survivors, although some relevant clinical trials from noncancer populations and acute pain settings are also discussed. The purpose of the review is to provide randomized clinical trial-level evidence of acupuncture for specific chronic pain syndromes associated with cancer treatments, to further expand the potential clinical applications of acupuncture for this population as recommended by the ASCO, and to provide future directions for oncology acupuncture research and practice in cancer survivorship.

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