Acupuncture Shows Promise as Treatment for Chemo-Related Neuropathy

Chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy is the most common and onerous side effect of neurotoxic chemotherapy.

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In a small pilot study, researchers found that acupuncture treatment, compared with a sham acupuncture treatment or no treatment, reduced chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy.

Chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy is, according to the published study in JAMA Network Open, “the most common and debilitating long-term adverse effect of neurotoxic chemotherapy that significantly worsens cancer survivors’ quality of life.”

Led by TingBao, MD, researchers at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City conducted a pilot randomized clinical trial in which they compared eight weeks of real ear and body acupuncture versus sham acupuncture or typical care (no acupuncture) among people withchemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy. Sham acupuncture, in which acupuncture needles are inserted in areas of the body not associated with traditional Chinese medicine practice, may work as a placebo to reduce pain. Sham-controlled randomized trials are designed to determine whether acupuncture has benefits that extend beyond the placebo effect.

The participants all had solid tumors with persistent moderate to severe neuropathy, including symptoms of numbness, tingling or pain that they rated as a 4 or greater on a scale of zero to 10, with zero being no pain and 10 being the worst imaginable pain. They had all completed three or more months of chemotherapy before enrolling in the study and were not taking neuropathy medication on a regular basis.

Between July 2017 and June 2018, the study enrolled 75 participants. They had a median age of 60 years old. Eighty percent were women, and 73% were white. Fifty-three percent had breast cancer, and 16% had colorectal cancer.

The study randomized the participants evenly into the three treatment groups; ultimately, 24 people received acupuncture, 23 received sham acupuncture and 21 received usual care.

Compared with usual care, real acupuncture was associated with a decline in reports of pain, tingling and numbness on the zero to 10 scale.

Between the study's baseline and week eight, the average reduction in pain was greatest for those who received real acupuncture (a 1.75-point decline) and the smallest for those who received usual care (a 0.19-point decline). Those who received the sham treatment experienced a 0.91-point decline in such symptoms.

At the 12-week follow-up point, the average reduction in pain was 1.74 points for those who received real acupuncture, compared with a 0.34-point decline among those who received the sham treatment.

The few adverse health events that the participants experienced were mild.

The study authors concluded that their study provided enough data to establish a sham-controlled efficacy trial of acupuncture treatment for this population.

To read the study, click here.

To learn more about chemotherapy-induced neuropathy, click here.

To learn more about acupuncture, click here.
