

Shoulder Pain

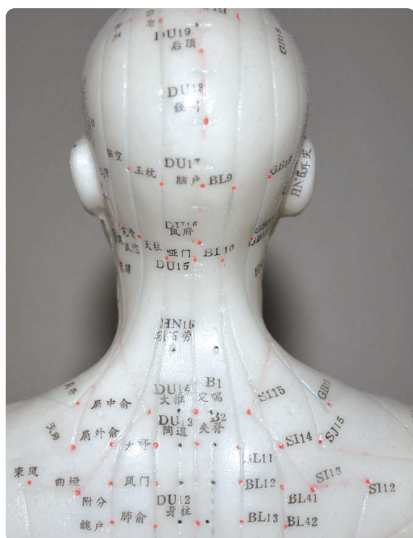
Summary Sheet

Evidence-Based Assessment of Acupuncture Series

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Shoulder Pain Overview

Shoulder pain is the third most common musculoskeletal condition, following back and neck pain.¹ The most common diagnoses relate to rotator cuff dysfunction (including impingement syndrome), adhesive capsulitis ('frozen shoulder'), glenohumeral osteoarthritis ('arthritis'), and subluxations/dislocations.² This summary will focus on the treatment of chronic shoulder pain and rotator cuff disorders. Of the common shoulder pain conditions, rotator cuff disorders are most prevalent (10%), however, the majority are poorly diagnosed/classified.² As a whole, these disorders often lead to impaired sleep, mood, and concentration and surveys suggest that shoulder pain disorders lead to quality of life impairment on par with several major medical conditions (e.g. heart disease and clinical depression).³ Chronic shoulder pain (>6mths) may be the result of any of the common shoulder pain diagnoses, e.g. an untreated rotator cuff tear. Individuals suffering from shoulder pain and other joint-related disorders frequently seek treatment from providers of Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH).⁴ Of the numerous CIH modalities, the use of acupuncture is on the rise and approximately 16% of acupuncture visits in the U.S. are for the treatment of joint-related pain.⁵



Shoulder Pain in Traditional East Asian Medicine (TEAM)

TEAM practitioners view the body in terms of Qi-dynamics and use a unique system and terminology. This is best summarized by the axiom "one pattern many diseases, one disease many patterns;" suggesting that identification of the correct pattern (e.g., Kidney qi deficiency) leads to improved shoulder treatment through the selection of pattern-specific acupuncture points. Shoulder pain, as a symptom, indicates a stagnation of the movement of qi and/or blood in the local channels, with additional contributing factors from lifestyle/work habits (e.g. repetitive overhead use) and TCM patterns.⁶⁻⁸ Local acupuncture points are seen as the primary treatment of choice and astute palpation of the arm, shoulder, neck and surrounding musculature is advised for accurate point selection. In addition to acupuncture, treatments often include massage, cupping therapy, moxa (heat therapy), and home therapies such as topical herbal analgesics.

Findings from the Acupuncture Research

Acupuncture appears effective for chronic shoulder pain; for rotator cuff disorders (impingement and tendinosis) the evidence is promising, but more research is needed.



Chronic Shoulder Pain:

- The most recent trial (n=80) suggests contralateral acupuncture is more effective than usual care.⁹
- A trial (n=424) suggests acupuncture is more effective than NSAIDs & physiotherapy; results maintained at 3-months.¹⁰
- A trial (n=425) suggests acupuncture (in addition to physiotherapy) is more effective than physiotherapy alone; results maintained at 1-year.¹¹
- The only systematic review conducted (2005) suggested: "...acupuncture may provide immediate improvements in both pain and function..."¹²

Summary and Commentary

Current treatment guidelines for shoulder pain recommend 2-3 months of exercise and physical therapy as well as medications (e.g. NSAIDs).¹³ Despite this, up to 50% of patients do not respond to usual care and will develop chronic shoulder pain.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Of note, an earlier guideline (from 2013) suggests that acupuncture should be included as part of the initial course of treatment and rates its effects as on par with the use of Acetaminophen (i.e. Tylenol).¹⁷ To date, the two largest trials suggest acupuncture is an effective option for shoulder pain and

warrants inclusion as part of a multi-modal treatment approach.^{10,11} Although numerous and varying treatment protocols have been studied, treatment frequencies were similar in the clinical trials. To generalize, participants most often received acupuncture treatment 1-2x/week for 1-2 months.

Scope and Purpose of Evidence-Based Assessment of Acupuncture Project

This project is supported by the Society for Acupuncture Research. It includes a growing library of condition specific assessments and summary sheets on topics such as dysmenorrhea, low back pain, neck pain, etc. Our aim is to evaluate the literature with a focus on systematic reviews and randomized controlled trials. When appropriate, other levels of evidence (e.g. case studies) are also referenced. The goal of the project is to inform policy-makers, clinicians, and the public of trends in the acupuncture literature and to provide expert commentary on the state of this evidence.

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