

Q. What is acupuncture?

A. Acupuncture is an integrative medicine practice that involves stimulation of specific points on the body, usually with a needle inserted into the skin, in order to treat a variety of health conditions. In Traditional Chinese medicine it is believed that balancing the flow of energy in the body, known as “Qi,” can improve health. Acupuncture is postulated to work by inserting and manipulating needles into specified “meridian points” to relieve blockages in the flow of Qi (Grant et al., 2016).

Q. What are the potential mechanisms of action underlying acupuncture for SUD?

A. There are many unanswered questions about the proposed basic mechanisms of acupuncture. For the treatment of substance use disorder (SUD), acupuncture needles are inserted and manipulated into meridian points purported to balance dopamine levels and reduce cortisol, ultimately decreasing cravings and withdrawal symptoms (Yang et al., 2008).

Q. Is acupuncture recommended in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A. **No.** The 2015 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Substance Use Disorders does not include acupuncture. Acupuncture has not met the burden of evidence required by the most recent VA/DoD guidelines as a treatment for SUD.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q. Do other authoritative reviews recommend acupuncture for SUD?

A. **No.** Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated the use of acupuncture for SUD.

Several other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using similar grading systems as the VA/DoD CPGs. These include the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Systematic Review Repository and the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews.

- AHRQ: No systematic reviews of acupuncture for SUD identified.
- Cochrane: No systematic reviews of acupuncture for SUD identified.

Q. Is there any recent research on acupuncture for SUD?

A. A 2015 systematic review by Grant et al. included 41 randomized clinical trials of needle acupuncture with 5,227 total participants. No significant differences of acupuncture were observed, whether used as monotherapy or as adjunctive therapy, versus any comparator for relapse, frequency of substance use, quantity of substance use or treatment dropout. Although acupuncture showed benefit in reducing withdrawal symptoms, cravings and anxiety immediately after treatment, the difference was not significant long-term, and the quality of evidence was low. Limited safety data suggests a low risk of serious adverse events. The authors note that their conclusions are limited by the low quality of evidence.

Q. What conclusions can be drawn about the use of acupuncture as a treatment for SUD in the MHS?

A. The current state of evidence for acupuncture is not mature enough to recommend it as an effective evidence-based treatment in MHS for SUD.

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References

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