# Can Acupuncture Help With Rheumatoid Arthritis Pain?

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## Acupuncture for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Acupuncture is a Chinese traditional medicine practice, dating back centuries. It involves the use of fine needles placed in pressure points throughout the body.

The goal of acupuncture treatment is to reduce inflammation, relax the body and increase blood flow. It is believed acupuncture treatments can release feel-good hormones, called endorphins, that help with pain relief.

Some people use acupuncture to get pain relief from joint pain, back pain, headaches, and even anxiety and depression. Since rheumatoid arthritis (RA) causes inflammation and pain, people with RA can try acupuncture to offer relief.

### How Does Acupuncture Work?

The goal of acupuncture treatment is to correct chi (energy) imbalances throughout the body. To do this, an acupuncturist will use very fine needles to stimulate 14 major energy carrying channels called meridians.

Qi flows through the meridians of the body and is accessible through numerous acupuncture points in the body. Inserting needles in these points in an appropriate combination may rebalance energy flow.

It should be noted there is no scientific proof acupuncture points actual exist. But there is no way to prove they don’t, and research has suggested acupuncture may help in treating some conditions.

Acupuncturists generally insert needles in the legs, knees, arms, and shoulders. Some people fall asleep during treatment because their body and mind are calm and relaxed.

### How Can Acupuncture Help with RA Pain?

Acupuncture has its skeptics, and much of the reasoning is because there is little evidence acupuncture can help relieve pain. Nonetheless, there has been some evidence suggesting acupuncture can help with RA pain.

One study out of the University of Ottawa found using electroacupuncture offered some relief for patients with RA knee pain. This type of acupuncture uses electric currents that pulsate through the needles. The study participants noted pain reduction within 24 hours after treatment and relief lasted up to four months. A shortcoming of the study was the sample size was too small. The researchers also noted acupuncture treatments had no effects on inflammation levels, the number of swollen and tender joints, disease activity, overall health and reduction of analgesic pain relievers.

The Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, located in the United States, notes two studies on the benefits of acupuncture and electroacupuncture in people with RA. The first study was a small 16-person study out of Russia

using electropuncture. Needles were placed at specific points of the ear and researchers later used blood samples to confirm improvement.

The second study of 54 participants involved “warm needling,” where acupuncture treatment consists of the use of use of Zhuifengsu, a Chinese herb. While the researchers noted the study was 100 percent effective, they did not share the specific criteria they were relying upon.

**Does Acupuncture Hurt?**

Every needle is swabbed with alcohol before it is placed. The number of needles used and how deeply they are placed depends on the reason for the treatments.

Needles are left in from several minutes to one hour. They may be adjusted, warmed or electrically energized to promote better results.

Electroacupuncture may cause tingling, but it is not painful. Manual acupuncture is not painful either.

A slight prick may be felt when the needle is inserted, but because the needles are thin, pain is very mild. It is possible to experience some numbness, tingling, mild soreness or heaviness after the needles are placed into the skin.

Most people will receive more than more treatment to manage pain or other rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.

**Acupuncture for Rheumatoid Arthritis Risks**

All therapies have risks and while acupuncture has few risks, it is still important to be aware of those. Possible risks of acupuncture include:

- Soreness, bleeding and/or light busing where needles are placed.
- Stomach upset.
- Fatigue.
- Lightheadedness.
- Muscle twitching.
- Heightened emotion.
- Infections due to unsterilized needles. This can be avoided by going to a credentialed and reputable acupuncturist.
- Needle breakage, but this is rare.
- Lung collapse if a needle is placed too deeply in the chest or upper back. This this is rare.

People with bleeding disorders and who use blood thinners should not treat their RA with acupuncture.

It should be noted acupuncture is a complementary therapy, which means it should be used with conventional treatments – and not alone – for people with chronic or severe illnesses.

Because acupuncture promotes relaxation, it might be a good idea to have a ride home. Even if you feel great after an acupuncture session, it is still a good idea to take it easy and to continue taking medications as prescribed.

**Should You Try Acupuncture for Rheumatoid Arthritis?**

If you want to try acupuncture to help with managing RA pain and inflammation, it is a good idea to talk to your doctor first on whether this is an option for you and the possible risks. Your insurance plan may or not cover the cost of treatment, so you should investigate the costs in advance.

Further, it is a good idea to do your research and seek out a provider of acupuncture who is reputable and

qualified. The National Certification Commission for Acupuncture is a good place to start.