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Fitness

## How Acupuncture Can Help You Manage Pain, Avoid Injury, and Train Smarter

Everything you need to know about the process of becoming a human pincushion. (Including, yes, whether it hurts.)

BY EMILY ABBATE

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Draft a list of “things that scare the crap out of people,” and we’ll safely guess that needles are somewhere in the top ten, sandwiched between “encountering spiders” and “meeting the parents.” Yet acupuncture enjoys persistent and widespread appeal: More than **14 million people** in the U.S. have taken a stab (sorry) at the millennia-old Chinese practice, and many doctors **hope** it can be an effective alternative to opioids for pain management—which could be the reason the proportion of Veterans Health Administration facilities that offer acupuncture has gone from **42 percent to 88 percent** over the past seven years.

Acupuncture is part of the ever-growing “alternative” medicine industry, which is **estimated** to be worth an astounding \$197 billion by 2025. And as with any wellness trend with this much money behind it, ritzy boutique-style facilities are now racing one another to open their doors in a storefront near you. “We wanted to demystify acupuncture and herbs through accessible in-person and online experiences,” says Michelle Larivee, co-founder of New York City’s WTHN. “We designed a treatment menu that’s easy to understand and navigate with some of the most common conditions.”

But what *are* some of those “common conditions” with which acupuncture might help, and what should you know before that first prick? Fear not (of needles or questions), because we are here to help.

### Why would I ever do this?

Acupuncture is the insertion of super-thin needles—between 0.12 mm and 0.35 mm—into strategic areas around the body called acupuncture points. Depending on where these needles are inserted, experts say, you can treat a number of different conditions and diseases. Research published in the *Journal of Pain* found that acupuncture can treat chronic pain, including back, neck, and shoulder pain, as well as conditions like chronic headaches and osteoarthritis. Randomized clinical trials have **found** that acupuncture can be an effective treatment for cancer-related pain, too.

Acupuncture can also be an athlete’s best friend. “It’s a natural partner for faster recovery, and many athletes use acupuncture to maintain top-performance shape,” says Shari Auth, DACM, co-founder of WTHN. “It can help improve flexibility, range of motion, and strength, as well as release sore or tight muscles and reduce inflammation.”

Traditional Chinese medicine also uses acupuncture as a method for balancing the energy—or chi—that flows through the meridians in your body. The process is able to stimulate the brain’s release of chemicals like serotonin and dopamine, according to Auth, which directly affect mood and stress.

### Does it hurt?

Good news for needle-phobes: You needn’t worry about developing a sudden case of uncontrollable, wretched-to-beleeches. Even the most sensitive patients won’t be able to feel much of anything once a needle is inserted. “You may feel some sensation, but they are not painful,” says Auth. “That’s because the needles used are as fine as a single strand of human hair—the experience is meant to be relaxing and rejuvenating.” We won’t blame you if you still want to look away, though.

Treatments typically last for 45 to 60 minutes. For the first 20 minutes, a practitioner is inserting needles while perhaps integrating other types of therapy, like cupping or herbs. They’ll leave you to rest for the remaining 20 to 40 minutes, and then return to remove the needles before sending you on your way. Also, rest assured that all reputable acupuncturists use needles only once and then dispose of them immediately afterward.

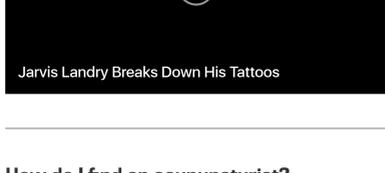
### What do I need to do beforehand?

Definitely make time to eat something, as you don’t want to be treated on an empty stomach, says Eliza Grimes, an acupuncturist and board-certified herbalist in New York City. (Unlike with the dreaded annual trip for bloodwork, no fasting is required.) Wear loose, comfortable clothing to keep those calm, cozy vibes flowing.

### How much?

Cost varies based on all the factors you’d expect: whether you’re in a major city or a suburb, for example, and what type of facility you’re checking out. According to *Consumer Reports*, people spend about \$200 out of pocket over the course of a multiple-appointment, non-drug pain-treatment regimen—a category that includes acupuncture, chiropractic, and massage. Although some insurance companies chip in for chiropractic or physical therapy, not all of them treat acupuncture similarly. Be sure to call your provider before booking an appointment, lest you unwittingly get stuck with the entire bill.

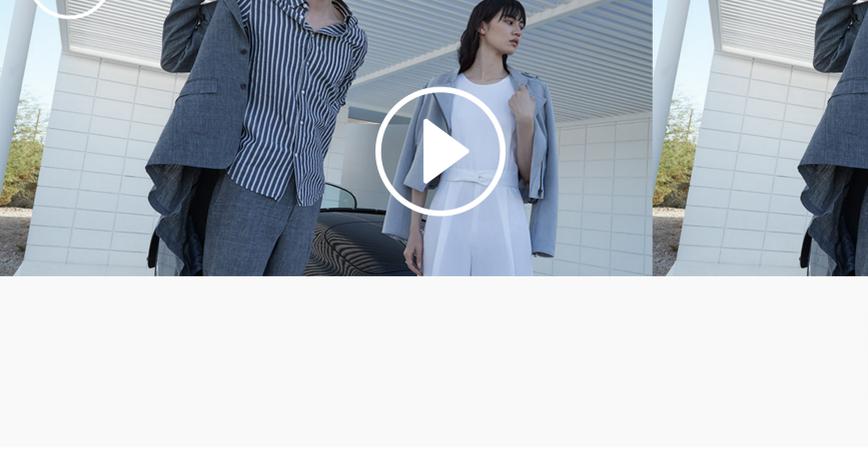
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### How do I find an acupuncturist?

Just as with a general practitioner, personal trainer, or life partner, you want to find an acupuncturist who makes you feel comfortable. And just like general practitioners, acupuncturists must obtain a whole lot of certifications and put in a whole lot of hours before they can get their needle on. (No such requirement exists for life partners, unfortunately.)

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“You’re entrusting your acupuncturist with your health, so it’s crucial to ensure your acupuncturist is qualified,” says **Elizabeth Trattner**, Dipl. Ac., a Chinese and integrative-medicine physician in Miami Beach. “Your acupuncturist should be licensed in their state and certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). Oftentimes, they’ll have a certain specialization, like men’s health, sports medicine, or pain management.”

The aforementioned licensed, NCCAOM-certified acupuncturists have all graduated from an accredited school and accumulated at least 1,800 hours of training. (You can confirm their qualifications in the **directory** online.) While you’re digging in, there’s no harm in poking around for patient testimonials on sites like Yelp or Google. As in the life-partner selection process, personal referrals can be very helpful.

### How will I feel afterward?

You’ll feel relaxed and calm after your treatment. You may —*may*—also feel a little sore.

Say it with us: Don’t Freak Out. This sensation typically subsides within 24 hours, or a bit longer with popular large trigger-point releases like hips, glutes, and shoulders. “Ease back into your normal routine,” suggests Grimes. “Take it easy, eat something delicious, and get a good night’s sleep.” You’ll be a healthier, happier human pincushion before you know it.

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