

How Acupuncture Can Be Used for Knee Osteoarthritis

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Acupuncture has been used in [traditional Chinese medicine \(TCM\)](#) to relieve pain and treat various health conditions for thousands of years. It's only recently been considered a mainstream treatment by Western medicine.

Increasingly over the last decade, major health organizations have incorporated acupuncture into their evidence-based treatment protocols.

The Joint Commission revised guidelines to include acupuncture in nonpharmacological pain management strategies in 2015, and the American Society of Clinical Oncology followed suit in 2016 by adding acupuncture to its list of pain management strategies for adult cancer survivors, according to [2021 research](#).

[The American College of Physicians](#) even included acupuncture as one of its first-line therapy recommendations for acute and chronic low back pain in 2017. By 2020, the [Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services](#) approved the use of acupuncture for treating chronic lower back pain.

More studies have shown the benefits of acupuncture, according to a [2021 research review](#). As a result, you may be wondering how exactly this therapy works and whether it can be used for health conditions like [osteoarthritis](#) of the knee. Osteoarthritis is a major cause of disability, affecting [22.9 percent](#) [Trusted Source](#) of people over age 40 around the world.

This article explains how acupuncture can treat osteoarthritis of the knee, what to expect if you try acupuncture therapy, and how effective it is as a pain management tool.

How can acupuncture treat pain from knee osteoarthritis?

[Acupuncture](#) is a therapy based in Chinese medicine. In it, a trained practitioner uses needles to pierce your skin in specific areas that are said to connect to energy points and channels throughout your body.

[The goal of this therapy](#) is to stimulate the flow of qi. Qi is an energy force believed to flow throughout your body and promote good health and well-being when balanced and unblocked.

Acupuncture works by activating several processes in the body that can all reduce pain in their own ways.

For example, acupuncture [has been found to reduce or relieve pain](#) by increasing blood flow to the areas where needles are inserted. This needle prick and increased blood flow can cause an anti-inflammatory response in your body and trigger the release of “feel good” body chemicals like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins. The endorphins released after acupuncture may decrease pain.

People have used acupuncture to relieve pain or discomfort caused by conditions like:

- allergies
- [anxiety](#) and [depression](#)
- [chronic pain](#)
- hypertension
- [insomnia](#)
- menstrual cramps and premenstrual syndrome (PMS)
- [migraine](#)
- [morning sickness](#)
- sprains
- stroke

When it comes to treating [osteoarthritis](#) of the knee, studies have shown benefits without the side effects of other medications for pain relief, according to a [2021 research review](#)[Trusted Source](#).

A licensed acupuncturist will know where to place the needles for optimal relief from knee osteoarthritis. Acupuncture points, sometimes called acupoints or pressure points, can be proximal (close to the knee) or distal (distant from the knee, such as in the hand).

What's an acupuncture session like for knee osteoarthritis?

Plan on spending about [90 minutes](#) at your first acupuncture appointment. You'll spend most of this time discussing your symptoms with the acupuncturist and learning what you can expect from the treatment. Future appointments usually take about 30 to 60 minutes, since you should already be familiar with the process and your acupuncturist.

When your acupuncturist is ready to begin needle placement, they will target areas that correspond with your symptoms. Sterile one-time-use needles that contain no medications will be inserted about a quarter- to a half-inch into your skin.

This treatment is not usually painful, but you may feel a pinch as the needles are inserted. The number of needles will depend on your condition and the style of acupuncture your therapist is performing.

One 2019 review found that most acupuncturists used between [4 and 12 weeks](#) of sessions, with acupuncture needles in place for between 20 and 30 minutes per session.

After your appointment, you may not notice results right away, especially if you have a chronic condition. Everyone responds differently to acupuncture, and it may take several sessions before you notice results.

While there are no real physical restrictions after acupuncture, you may have better results if you avoid exercise, stress, or vigorous activities for the rest of the day after your therapy.

How to find a qualified acupuncturist

If you're interested in trying acupuncture to relieve symptoms of knee osteoarthritis, be sure to look for a licensed acupuncturist.

One of the best ways to find a qualified acupuncturist is to get a recommendation from a healthcare professional or someone you know who has used the acupuncturist before. Don't be afraid to ask for references and qualifications when selecting an acupuncturist.

You can also [check a therapist's certification or licensure by state](#) through the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.

How effective is acupuncture for knee osteoarthritis?

There's little hard evidence on how effective acupuncture can be in treating osteoarthritis of the knee, but anecdotal evidence and reports from people who have used acupuncture point toward a positive effect on pain.

A report from the [American Academy of Family Physicians](#) endorses acupuncture for both pain relief and improved physical function, especially when combined with other traditional therapies.

According to a [2019 research review](#), studies have confirmed that people who've used acupuncture for knee osteoarthritis have reported significant improvement in both pain and function after treatment.

Another large [study from 2012 Trusted Source](#) on acupuncture use for osteoarthritis found that acupuncture worked so well for every type of pain condition researched that it should be considered to be a reasonable referral option.

Your individual results with acupuncture for the relief of knee osteoarthritis will depend on several factors, like:

- your overall health
- the skill of your acupuncturist
- how often you receive treatment

Are there any side effects to be aware of from acupuncture?

Side effects from acupuncture aren't usually serious, but it's best to take the day to rest after your treatment and avoid substances like caffeine and alcohol.

Most reported side effects include things like:

- dizziness
- infection
- bleeding
- allergic reactions
- tingling or burning sensations
- anxiety
- cough
- increased thirst
- fatigue
- fever

Although acupuncture is generally considered safe, there have been some serious complications reported, according to a [2015 review](#) that looked at adverse effects of acupuncture in China between 1980 and 2013. These included organ or nerve damage and even broken needles.

Finding a licensed acupuncturist with solid recommendations is your best bet to avoid any complications or side effects from the therapy.

What other treatments are available for knee osteoarthritis?

The most common way to treat osteoarthritis of the knee is with medications designed to help reduce pain and inflammation.

[Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs \(NSAIDs\)](#) like ibuprofen are a popular choice, but frequent use of these medications can lead to stomach discomfort and even bleeding problems.

[Other treatment options](#) that might offer better long-term relief include:

- weight loss
- physical therapy
- exercise
- [steroid injections](#)
- [knee replacement](#)

Takeaway

Acupuncture is just one option when it comes to treating osteoarthritis of the knee.

While there is limited hard evidence on the benefits of this therapy for osteoarthritis, several research studies have suggested and many patients have reported relief after acupuncture.

If you're interested in trying acupuncture, talk with your doctor and be sure to select a qualified acupuncturist. It may take several visits to notice an improvement in your symptoms, especially with more advanced cases of osteoarthritis.