

Acupuncture Clears Skin Conditions

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University of California doctors find acupuncture improves patient outcomes for the treatment of skin disorders including dermatitis, urticaria, chloasma, pruritus, and hyperhidrosis. A total of 17 out of 24 studies demonstrated that “acupuncture showed statistically significant improvements in outcome measurements compared with placebo acupuncture, alternative treatment options, and no intervention.” The doctors conclude that “the findings

of this review reveal that acupuncture may improve outcome measures in the treatment of multiple dermatologic conditions, including dermatitis, chloasma, pruritus, urticaria, hyperhidrosis, and facial elasticity.”

Based on the meta-analysis the doctors note, “The results of this review support acupuncture as an alternative therapy in dermatology, with 17 of 24 studies showing statistically significant improvement in outcome measures compared with no intervention or other treatment options.” The doctors add, “acupuncture improved outcome measures statistically significantly more than placebo acupuncture, suggesting possible merit in the traditional theory of acupoints on meridians.”

Doctors from the Department of Dermatology at the University of California, Davis (Sacramento) reviewed 1,225 dermatology related investigations and narrowed the field to 24 studies meeting the inclusion criteria. Only articles written in English were accepted. All studies using electroacupuncture and moxibustion were excluded. Only manual acupuncture studies were allowed. The doctors note, “Our search was also limited to studies published in the English language, which excludes many studies performed in China, where acupuncture is more prevalent and widely studied.”

All 6 of the atopic dermatitis studies showed statistically significant improvements in patient outcomes. The studies compared acupuncture intervention with either a placebo control group or no intervention. The mean wheal or skin flare size were significantly reduced in 3 studies. A wheal is a circumscribed papule or plaque of edema of the skin.

Acupuncture significantly reduced both the “rate and duration of urticarial episodes” in a randomized controlled trial using placebo controls. Another randomized controlled trial found acupuncture more effective for clearing wheals than oral antihistamines. An observational study found acupuncture effective for prolonging the time between urticaria relapses and “showed

complete clearance of wheals in 25.8% of patients....” An additional 3 randomized controlled trials and 1 case report found acupuncture effective in alleviating pruritus.

Acupuncture was found effective in the treatment of chloasma. Also referred to as melasma, chloasma is a type of hyperpigmentation of the skin. This may occur during pregnancy in the form of brown patches on the face. A randomized controlled trial found acupuncture combined with herbal medicine more effective than vitamin C and E intake for the “clearance of chloasma.” Another study documents that acupuncture cleared greater than 90% of chloasma in 40% of patients. A greater than 30% clearance was found in 87% of patients.

Additional research found acupuncture effective for the treatment of breast inflammation, HPV warts, polyhidrosis, and facial elasticity conditions. In a Swedish randomized controlled trial of 205 breastfeeding women, acupuncture “significantly alleviated breast erythema, tension and pain compared with oxytocin spray alone.” Another study found acupuncture effective in the treatment of hyperhidrosis with significant reductions in sweating greater than a control using the drug estazolam. In a case report of an HIV patient with a chronic HPV wart that was resistant to cryotherapy, acupuncture cleared the wart. This was accomplished with 58 acupuncture treatments over a period of 19 months.

The doctors investigated possible mechanisms for the efficaciousness of acupuncture in terms of a biomedical model of understanding. They note that acupuncture may be involved in “neuromodulation of the immune system in mediating the pathogenesis of inflammatory and infectious skin conditions, such as acne, dermatitis, urticaria, and HPV. Studies on rats have shown decreased levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines— including tumor necrosis factor- α , interleukin-1b, and interleukin-6—after stimulation with acupuncture.” The investigators add, “Modern investigations into possible mechanisms of acupuncture have mixed results on the validity of meridians, but consistent across studies is involvement of the autonomic nervous system and hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, recruited via peripheral sensory receptors.”



The meta-analysis demonstrates acupuncture’s potential for the treatment of dermatological conditions in achieving positive patient outcomes. The integration of acupuncture into standard protocols of care in the United States and many other nations has yet to be implemented. The University of California doctors suggest additional research to determine the mechanisms of acupuncture’s effective actions. Additionally, more research is suggested to provide clinical guidelines for clinicians and to determine efficacy rates.

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