

# Acupuncture for Treating Lupus: Possible Treatment for Lupus Pain and Fatigue

Published by [Very Well Health](#) on December 2020



Systemic lupus erythematosus, also called SLE or just [lupus](#), is an [autoimmune disease](#) that's difficult to treat. Because many people don't find adequate relief with conventional medical treatments, they often turn to [complementary and alternative treatments](#), such as [acupuncture](#).

In lupus, a disordered immune system attacks certain tissues in your body. It most often affects one or more of the following:

- Heart
- Lungs
- Blood cells
- Kidneys
- Brain

Pain and fatigue are among the most common [symptoms of lupus](#), but it can also feature a host of other symptoms, including hair loss, a facial rash, and sensitivity to light.

Acupuncture as a lupus treatment hasn't received a great deal of attention from researchers, but some early studies show promising results.

### How Acupuncture Works

Acupuncture involves placing extremely thin needles—about the width of a hair—in specific places around the body in order to relieve symptoms of a multitude of illnesses. It's been practiced in China, as part of [traditional Chinese medicine](#) (TCM), for thousands of years.

The Eastern belief is that acupuncture restores the proper flow of energy, or “chi,” through your body, stimulates healing, and aids in relaxation.

Western researchers have different theories about how acupuncture might work:

- It may impact the [autonomic nervous system](#), which regulates automatic functions in your body (such as blood flow and temperature).
- It may make your brain release endorphins, which are natural pain relievers.<sup>1</sup>
- It may stimulate the [lymphatic system](#).<sup>2</sup>
- It may stimulate the [central nervous system](#) to release certain chemicals into your brain, spinal cord, and muscles that promote healing.<sup>3</sup>

It's possible that more than one of those theories is correct.

Over the past few decades, acupuncture has gained acceptance in much of the Western medical community.

### [Acupuncture for Migraines](#)

#### Acupuncture for Lupus

According to the National Institutes of Health, studies show acupuncture may help ease many types of chronic pain and is safe when performed properly.<sup>4</sup>

Some research suggests that acupuncture may be beneficial for treating autoimmune disease in general, possibly by stimulating the lymphatic system, which plays an important part in your immune function and is believed to be dysfunctional in autoimmune disease.<sup>2</sup>

While the lymphatic system hasn't been studied in lupus, some research indicates lymphatic dysfunction plays a role.<sup>5</sup>

Looking at the symptom of pervasive and persistent fatigue in lupus, a review of studies found some evidence that acupuncture may relieve fatigue in some people with this disease. (It also said exercise, [diet](#), phototherapy, plus behavioral and psychological approaches also reduced fatigue.)<sup>6</sup>

Another review found some evidence that acupuncture may reduce the pain of lupus by more than 30%. That was also true of the control group, but reviewers point out that the “control” method used also involved inserting needles into the skin, which may actually have provided a therapeutic benefit.<sup>7</sup>

A case study of a woman with lupus reported that acupuncture:<sup>8</sup>

- Reduced pain

- Improved sleep quality
- Improved health-related quality of life

Another case report focusing on the Eastern view of acupuncture's effect on energy flow states followed a woman with lupus, who had high amounts of protein in her urine. Called proteinuria, this can result from inflammation in the kidneys due to their being under attack by lupus.

Researchers say the woman experienced:<sup>9</sup>

- Less pain and stiffness
- Reduced hair loss
- Less protein in her urine
- An improved mental state

Thus far, large, high-quality studies of acupuncture for lupus haven't been performed. These early results are encouraging, though, and likely will lead to more research that may give us better information about this treatment option.

### [Natural Treatments for Lupus](#)

#### Getting Acupuncture

When you go in for an acupuncture session, you'll lie on a massage table and the acupuncturist will insert needles into the sites around your body believed to be involved in your condition. They may twist the needles after they're inserted.

Most people feel a tiny prick or an achy sensation when the needles are first inserted, which usually goes away quickly. If it doesn't, let the practitioner know.

The needles are then left in for a while, typically between 10 and 30 minutes, while you're left to relax. The acupuncturist will then return and remove the needles, which is typically painless.

Some people feel relaxed after acupuncture while others feel energized. If you feel strange or have unpleasant symptoms, tell the practitioner.

#### Possible Side Effects

The National Institutes of Health says that acupuncture is associated with few side effects when it's properly performed by a licensed acupuncturist. Side effects may include:<sup>10</sup>

- Bruising
- Bleeding
- Pain

- Skin rashes
- Allergic reactions
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Fainting

Side effects from improper treatment include:<sup>4</sup>

- Infections from non-sterile needles
- Punctured organs
- Collapsed lungs
- Central nervous system injury

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates acupuncture needles and requires them to be sterile, for single-use only, and manufactured to meet certain standards.

#### Finding an Acupuncturist

When you're looking for an acupuncturist, you want to make sure they're licenced. Look for the title "LAc," which stands for licensed acupuncturist. If possible, try to find someone who's knowledgeable about lupus and any other health problems you may have.

Your doctor or other medical providers may be able to refer you to an acupuncturist they're familiar with. In addition, several organizations can help you find a licensed practitioner in your area:

- [The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture](#)
- [The National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine](#)
- [HealthPros.com](#)
- [Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine](#)
- [American Society of Acupuncturists](#)
- [Acufinder.com](#)

#### Will Insurance Cover It?

Don't end up with surprise expenses. Check with your insurance company to see whether it covers acupuncture and, if so, whether there's a list of practitioners that participate in your health plan.

#### A Word From Verywell

If you're interested in trying acupuncture for lupus, the first step is having a conversation with your doctor. They can help you determine any special risks you may face and discuss the benefits you may realistically expect to see.

Don't expect acupuncture to replace your current treatments; instead, think of it as an addition to your regimen that may help you control symptoms your medications don't fully relieve.