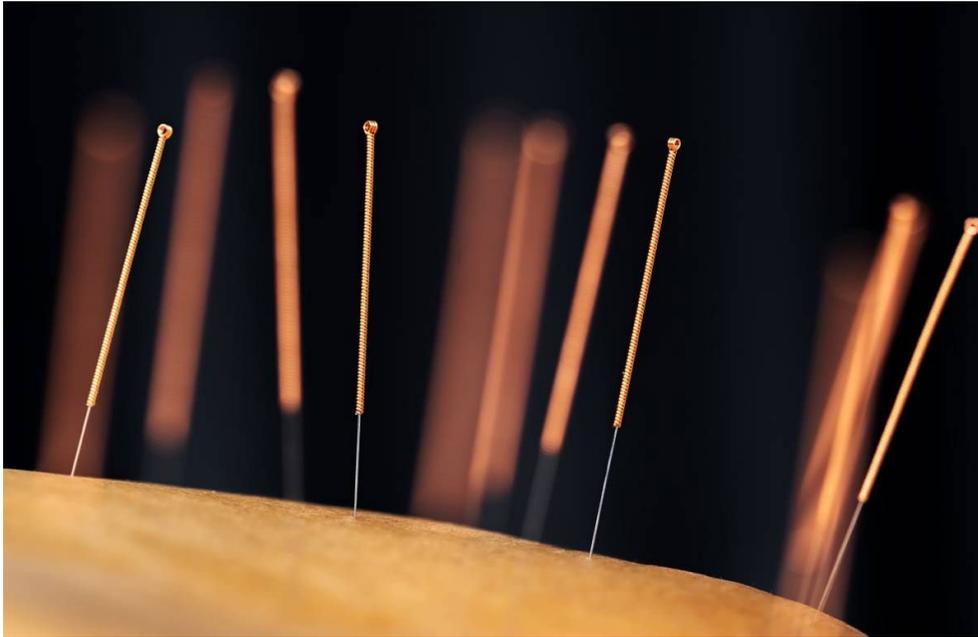


# How Acupuncture Can Help With Pain During the Pandemic

Published by [Next Avenue](#) on August 2020



As a longtime ballroom dancer, Nancy Ladisky is no stranger to pain.

“I had my first acupuncture treatment thirty-five years ago, and it took away my pain,” says the Santa Rosa Valley, Calif., resident. Over the years, Ladisky has had acupuncture treatments for her fibromyalgia, back pain, neck pain, migraines, gastric problems and more. “Acupuncture helps me with everything,” she says.

Ladisky got regular acupuncture treatments from [Dr. Stephen Chee](#), a dual-licensed M.D. and acupuncturist based in Beverly Hills, Calif., but took four months off at the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak.

“Without acupuncture, I noticed a ten- to fifteen-fold increase in my pain during that time,” she says.

When she started back on her treatments, she “felt human again,” and her pain decreased dramatically.

## Chronic Pain and the Pandemic

If you’re one of the [50 million Americans](#) who suffer from chronic pain, the pandemic may have made it worse.

"This is the very first time in the U.S. that acupuncture has been covered by Medicare."

First, the pandemic shifted health care resources towards intensive care and COVID-19 medical sites. Chronic pain management was considered non-urgent, and elective surgeries and in-person pain management services were temporarily shut down.

Kavita Trivedi, an associate professor at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Texas, says neck and back pain has increased for many people during the pandemic, as more people are working from home, sitting more and working on their computers. In addition, stress can also lead to [pain](#), and the pandemic has provided a source of constant worry around health, finances, family and more.

And, of course, not surprising to most of us over 50, chronic pain affects [older people more than younger people](#).

If you're looking for relief from pain, without drugs or invasive procedures, acupuncture is an option.

Pain Relief

During [acupuncture](#), practitioners stimulate specific points on the body, typically by inserting thin needles through the skin.

In its [report on acupuncture](#), the World Health Organization lists over 43 diseases, conditions and symptoms that can be treated with acupuncture, including pain-related conditions such as lower back pain, headaches, neck pain and arthritis.

Now, Medicare Coverage

Just in time for the pandemic, Medicare recipients got financial relief for acupuncture treatments.

In January, 2020, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) announced its [decision](#) to cover up to 12 acupuncture sessions in 90 days for Medicare patients with chronic lower back pain or LBP. Eight additional sessions can be added if patients show improvement.

"This is the very first time in the U.S. that acupuncture has been covered by Medicare," says David W. Miller, dual-licensed as an M.D. and acupuncturist, and founding chair of the [American Society of Acupuncturists](#). "It's really exciting, and provides even more validity to the practice of acupuncture."

Why did Medicare decide to cover acupuncture for lower back pain specifically? "Because tons of [studies](#) show the effectiveness of acupuncture for LBP," says Mori West, insurance committee chair of the American Society of Acupuncturists and CEO of [ACUCLAIMS](#), an

acupuncture and chiropractic billing service. "It's also the top diagnosis I see on the claims I process."

**"Acupuncture is a game changer, and doesn't have the side effects of drugs or invasive procedures."**

There are some restrictions to the new Medicare coverage, however.

Licensed acupuncturists can only provide this service if they are supervised by medical doctors (M.D. or D.O. designations), physician assistants or nurse practitioners/clinical nurse specialists trained in acupuncture, who then need to process the acupuncture claim. Currently, licensed acupuncturists can't directly bill Medicare.

Health providers could start billing Medicare for acupuncture for chronic LBP in May.

#### The Cost of the Acupuncture Treatments

"Each session generally costs between \$40 and \$150, depending on where you are in the country and what style of treatment you are receiving," says Miller.

Today, an increasing number of private insurance plans, including Medicare supplemental coverage or [Medicare Advantage](#) plans, and policies provided by employers offer some type of acupuncture coverage, says Miller.

#### Staying Safe During Treatments

The Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine has issued an [advisory](#) with best practices for reopening acupuncture offices during the pandemic.

Chee, who treats Nancy Ladisky, takes safety precautions seriously. "Patients call us from outside the building, wear a mask when they're inside, and we do a temperature screening. Then we walk them to a treatment room, due to our no-waiting room policy," he says. "All staff members wear N-95 masks, use gloves and get regular COVID-19 testing."

Chee also minimizes interactions with others outside of work and home, knowing that he works with a group vulnerable to serious illness if they contract COVID-19: 80% of his patients are over 60.

#### Receiving Medicare Coverage

Paying out of pocket for acupuncture was worth it, says Ladisky, but now that Medicare can cover her acupuncture costs, she's delighted.

"Acupuncture is a game changer, and doesn't have the side effects of drugs or invasive procedures," she says.

Neil Olshansky, of Bridgewater, Conn., was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease at the age of 30. Since that time, he has had acupuncture treatments on and off for his back pain.

When his acupuncturist, Dr. [Mitchell Prywes](#), told him that Medicare could now cover his treatments, Olshansky exclaimed, "Sign me up!"

Dr. Mitchell Prywes

He gets relief from back pain within 15 minutes after his current acupuncture treatments and can then go back to daily activities, including bending over, moving around and even exercising.

"I'm a big fan of acupuncture," Olshansky says. "Especially when it's free and I don't have any co-pays!"

Nancy Green, of Baltimore, was in a lot of pain during the pandemic. Her acupuncturist, [Tom Ingegno](#) of Charm City Integrative Health, hadn't been seeing patients for a few months during the outbreak. "When he opened back up, I got my treatments and the pain went away," Green says.

She has received acupuncture treatments from Ingegno on and off for 10 years, for neck pain, sciatica, back pain, arthritis, shoulder pain and hip pain.

"I never wanted surgery, epidurals or cortisone," Green says. "And I can't take non-steroidal meds because I have stomach issues."

While Ingegno isn't able to bill through Medicare, Green is one of the 80% of his patients whose insurance covers acupuncture visits. Green's Medicare Advantage Plan offers unlimited visits with a small co-pay per visit.

"Acupuncture is wonderful," says Green. "I wish more people would take advantage of it."