

Acupuncture, real or fake, called best for lower-back pain

By Carla K. Johnson
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CHICAGO — The Chinese practice of acupuncture is more effective at alleviating chronic lower-back pain than physical therapy, pain medications, and other treatments typically used in the United States, German researchers reported yesterday.

Nearly half the patients treated with acupuncture needles felt relief that lasted months. In contrast, only about a quarter of the patients who received Western medical treatments felt better.

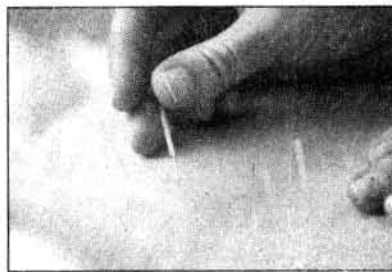
Even fake acupuncture — in which the needles weren't placed as deeply or in spots normally considered beneficial — worked better than conventional care, leading researchers to wonder whether pain relief came from the body's reac-

tions to any thin needle pricks, or, possibly, from the placebo effect.

"Acupuncture represents a highly promising and effective treatment option for chronic back pain," coauthor Heinz Endres of Ruhr University Bochum in Bochum, Germany, said via e-mail. "Patients experienced not only reduced pain intensity, but also reported improvements in the disability that often results from back pain — and therefore in their quality of life."

Although the study was not designed to determine how acupuncture works, he said, its findings are in line with a theory that pain messages to the brain can be blocked by competing stimuli.

Positive expectations the patients held about acupuncture — or negative expectations about convention-



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Researchers found that even fake acupuncture outperformed pain medications and physical therapy.

al medicine — also could have led to a placebo effect and explain the findings, he said.

In the largest experiment on acupuncture for back pain to date, more than 1,100 patients were randomly assigned to receive either

acupuncture, sham acupuncture or conventional therapy.

After six months, patients answered questions about pain and functional ability; scores determined how well each method worked.

In the real-acupuncture group, 47 percent of patients improved. In the sham-acupuncture group, 44 percent did. In the usual-care group, 27 percent got relief.

Brian Berman, the University of Maryland's director of complementary medicine, said the real and the sham acupuncture may have worked for reasons that can be explained in Western terms: by changing the way the brain processes pain signals or by releasing natural painkillers in the body.

In the study, the conventional treatment included painkillers, in-

jections, physical therapy, massage and heat therapy. As with acupuncture, those getting usual care received about 10 sessions of 30 minutes each.

The study, in yesterday's Archives of Internal Medicine, used a broad definition for low-back pain but ruled out people with back pain caused by spinal fractures, tumors, scoliosis or pregnancy.

Funding came from German health-insurance companies; the findings already have led to more coverage in Germany for acupuncture.

In the United States, some health plans cover it for some conditions but may require preapproval, according to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. An acupuncture session typically costs \$45 to \$100.