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Research

Randomised controlled trial of a short course of traditional acupuncture compared with usual care for persistent non-specific low back pain

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Abstract

Objective To determine whether a short course of traditional **acupuncture** improves longer term outcomes for patients with persistent non-specific low back **pain** in primary care.

Design Pragmatic, open, **randomised controlled trial**.

Setting Three private **acupuncture** clinics and 18 general practices in York, England.

Participants 241 adults aged 18-65 with non-specific low back **pain** of 4-52 weeks' duration.

Interventions 10 individualised **acupuncture** treatments from one of six qualified acupuncturists (160 patients) or usual care only (81 patients).

Main outcome measures The primary outcome was SF-36 bodily **pain**, measured at 12 and 24 months. Other outcomes included reported use of analgesics, scores on the Oswestry **pain** disability index, safety, and patient satisfaction.

Results 39 general practitioners referred 289 patients of whom 241 were **randomised**. At 12 months average SF-36 **pain** scores increased by 33.2 to 64.0 in the **acupuncture** group and by 27.9 to 58.3 in the control group. Adjusting for baseline score and for any clustering by acupuncturist, the estimated **intervention effect** was 5.6 points (95% confidence interval -0.2 to 11.4) at 12 months (n = 213) and 8.0 points (2.8 to 13.2) at 24 months (n = 182). The magnitude of the difference between the groups was about 10%-15% of the **final pain** score in the control group. Functional disability was not improved. No serious or life threatening events were reported.

Conclusions Weak evidence was found of an effect of **acupuncture** on persistent non-specific low back **pain** at 12 months, but stronger evidence of a small benefit at 24 months. Referral to a qualified traditional acupuncturist for a short course of treatment seems safe and acceptable to patients with low back **pain**.

Trial registration ISRCTN80764175 [controlled-trials.com] .

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