

Acupuncture for Tennis Elbow

Study Suggests Treatment Is Effective, Even in Difficult Cases

By Michael Devitt

One of the most frequent injuries suffered by professional athletes and weekend warriors alike is epicondylitis, an inflammation of the muscles and tendons of the forearm. More commonly known as tennis elbow, it is caused by repeated twisting of the wrist or frequent rotation of the forearm, and can lead to a weakened grip, elbow pain, and damage to the tendons that connect to the humerus, the bone of the upper arm.

Traditional treatment of tennis elbow consists of therapies such as braces, medications, heat, physical therapy and rest, the majority of which are effective in relieving pain but do very little to prevent the condition from recurring. Research from a pilot study presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation in San Francisco¹ suggests that acupuncture not only relieves the symptoms of tennis elbow, it appears to resolve the condition completely.

In the study, Dr. Peter Dorsher, a medical doctor certified in acupuncture, performed acupuncture on 22 patients with varying degrees of tennis elbow. Dorsher used "rounded" acupuncture needles, which are designed to pierce the skin and enter the muscle with as little damage as possible. All of the patients were treated with French energetic meridian therapy, with needles inserted at local points on the elbow in tight myofascial bands.

Each patient was treated between 2-10 times. After an average of 3.9 treatments, a "maximal response" was achieved, with every patient reporting a disappearance of their symptoms. This response also appeared to last much longer than that usually seen in patients using painkillers, braces or other traditional methods. At a mean followup time of 8.5 months after receiving acupuncture, 17 patients (77.3%) experienced a resolution of their symptoms and had returned to full, normal activities; another two patients had returned to normal

activities except those that involved heavy lifting in the affected arm.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Dorsher's study is that many patients had endured months of pain before turning to acupuncture. Subjects in the study group suffered symptoms an average of eight months; six patients had experienced symptoms for more than two years.

Furthermore, nearly every patient who participated had previously attempted to cure their tennis elbow through conventional means, with some patients trying multiple therapies without success before trying acupuncture. Of the 22 subjects in the study, 14 had undergone "extensive hand therapy interventions"; 17 had used an elbow brace or splint; seven received corticosteroid injections for pain relief; and one patient had elbow surgery, all without achieving the desired effect, before turning to acupuncture.

In an interview with Reuters Health, Dorsher said that it was unclear why acupuncture seemed to help patients in the early and latter stages of tennis elbow but added that the needles appeared to immediately loosen the tight muscles around the elbow joint. Acupuncture was found to be so helpful, he noted, that he now performs it as a primary form of treatment.

"This is an extremely powerful tool for pain," he said.²

Based on the pilot study's encouraging results, Dorsher plans to conduct a larger, prospective controlled study in the near future, with some patients receiving acupuncture and some receiving an inactive placebo.

References

1. Dorsher PT. Treatment of chronic lateral epicondylitis with acupuncture: a pilot study. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, San Francisco, CA, November 4, 2000.
2. Norton A. Acupuncture serves up cure for tennis elbow. Reuters Health, November 6, 2000.



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