

Acupuncture eases tamoxifen-related hot flashes



Acupuncture treatment is performed on a patient in Toronto in this July 17, 2008 file photo.

Credit: Reuters/Mike Cassese

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A new study provides more evidence that acupuncture can help ease hot flashes in women with breast cancer who are being treated with the "anti-estrogen" drug tamoxifen.

Acupuncture, researchers found, is free of side effects and has a side benefit for some women: an increased sex drive.

"Acupuncture appears to be at least as effective as drug therapy," Dr. Eleanor M. Walker of Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit and her colleagues report, "and it may provide additional and longer-term benefits without adverse effects."

Breast cancer patients with estrogen-sensitive tumors are typically given estrogen-blocking drugs for years at a time. These drugs, which include tamoxifen, bring on menopausal symptoms like hot flashes and night sweats.

The antidepressant drug Effexor (venlafaxine) is the standard treatment for these symptoms, Walker and her team note in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, but it can have unpleasant side effects, including dry mouth, nausea, and constipation. Non-drug treatments with few or no side effects are "urgently needed," they add.

To investigate whether acupuncture might be an option, Walker and her team randomly assigned 25 women to receive Effexor or acupuncture for 12 weeks, following them for up to year after the end of treatment. Both treatments reduced hot flashes, night sweats, and symptoms of depression to a similar degree, and also significantly improved mental health, the researchers found. But within two weeks after treatment ended, women in the Effexor group saw their hot flashes increase; this didn't happen in the acupuncture group. Eighteen women in the Effexor group had side effects, such as dizziness and anxiety, while none of the women given acupuncture had such side effects. About a quarter of the women given acupuncture said their

sex drive had increased. "Most women also reported an improvement in their energy, clarity of thought, and sense of well-being," Walker and her team note.

The researchers also point out that Effexor could impair the effectiveness of tamoxifen in some patients, because it can block the body's metabolism of the drug.

Acupuncture, they conclude, is a "safe, effective and durable treatment" for hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms stemming from anti-estrogen hormone therapy in women with breast cancer. They hope this study will "lead to a change in the pattern of practice" of treating these symptoms in patients with breast cancer.

In traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture has been used for hot flashes. The current findings showing that acupuncture has the ability to cool breast cancer-related hot flashes build on findings reported by the same researchers in 2008. (See Reuters Health report, September 22, 2008).

SOURCE: Journal of Clinical Oncology, online December 28, 2009.

Acupuncture Cuts Ails of Breast Cancer Drugs

Acupuncture Reduces Side Effects From Tamoxifen, Arimidex

By Daniel J. DeNoon

WebMD Health News

Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD



Sept. 22, 2008 -- Acupuncture eases the hot flashes and night sweats common in women taking tamoxifen and Arimidex after breast cancer treatment.

In a clinical trial, acupuncture helped hot flashes as much as Effexor, the antidepressant currently prescribed for women suffering the menopausal side effects of anti-estrogen drugs.

Effexor itself has troubling side effects, but acupuncture doesn't, says study leader Eleanor Walker, MD, a radiation oncologist at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital.

"With acupuncture you can get a treatment for those hot flashes that can alleviate them equal to drug therapy -- without side effects and with improved quality of life," Walker tells WebMD.

Acupuncture is a technique from Chinese medicine. It involves the usually painless process of placing extremely thin needles into the skin along specific "acupuncture points." Acupuncturists think of these points as nodes where lines of bodily energy converge, although these lines of energy do not correspond to any actual physical structures known to Western medicine.

Walker and colleagues studied 47 women receiving either tamoxifen or Arimidex after breast cancer treatment. Each woman suffered at least 14 hot flashes a week.

Half the women were treated with Effexor for 12 weeks; the other half received acupuncture. The two groups had similar, significant decreases in hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms. Both groups also had fewer symptoms of depression.

But women taking Effexor also had negative side effects. These included nausea, dry mouth, headache, difficulty sleeping, dizziness, double vision, increased blood pressure, constipation, fatigue, anxiety, feeling "spaced out," and body jerking during the night.

Women getting acupuncture had none of these side effects, but they did report increases in energy, clarity of thought, sexual desire, and overall well-being.

The findings don't surprise licensed acupuncturist Janet Konefal, PhD, assistant dean for complementary and integrative medicine at the University of Miami.

"We have had full-time, licensed acupuncturists at our cancer center for almost a decade," Konefal tells WebMD.

Konefal says acupuncturists help cancer patients deal not only with anti-estrogen therapy, but also with the troubling side effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

"Acupuncture is a way to help regulate the body and enhance what it would normally do," she says. "If you are taking a medication to alter a condition, acupuncture is not going to override that. It is going to support the system to help it better handle that treatment."

Walker says that most major cancer centers now have integrative medicine departments that offer acupuncture.

"Obviously people are recognizing the benefit," Walker says. "Women need to talk to their insurance companies and push them to cover the cost -- to say, 'Look, here is a viable treatment that is less expensive than drug therapy.' And they need to tell their doctors they want this type of treatment.

Most women suffering hot flashes aren't taking breast cancer drugs -- they're undergoing menopause.

Acupuncture can help these women too, Walker and Konefal say.

"What we are looking for is for women undergoing menopause to feel vital and healthy and to go through what would be difficult with a lot more ease," Konefal says.

And improved sexual function is part of this restored vitality.

"Acupuncture can help women with this," Konefal says. "It can increase blood flow to an area of the body.

One thing acupuncture now is used for is [fertility](#). When women get in vitro insemination, they can get acupuncture before and after to increase blood flow to the uterus and ovaries and increase their chances of a normal [pregnancy](#)."

Men, too, can improve their sexual function with acupuncture treatment. Walker says acupuncture can ease the side effects of chemical castration -- androgen-deprivation therapy -- in men treated for [prostate cancer](#). Walker is presenting her findings in a presentation to the 50th annual meeting of the American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology, held Sept. 21-25, in Boston.