

## More HTA back pain studies

### Does early magnetic resonance imaging influence management or improve outcome in patients referred to secondary care with low back pain? A pragmatic randomised controlled trial (Gilbert) HTA Vol 8.17

The aim of the research was to establish whether the use of sophisticated imaging techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computed tomography (CT) influences the clinical management and outcome of patients with low back pain and whether it is cost effective. The researchers found that the early use of sophisticated imaging does not appear to affect management overall but does result in a slight improvement in clinical outcome at an estimated cost of £870 per quality-adjusted life year. Imaging was associated with an increase in clinicians' diagnostic confidence, particularly for non-specialists.

Project details: [www.nchta.org/execsumm/summ817.htm](http://www.nchta.org/execsumm/summ817.htm)

Other titles include:

- ▶ The role of radiography in primary care patients with low back pain of at least six weeks duration: a randomised (unblinded) controlled trial
- ▶ Routine referral for radiography of patients presenting with low back pain: is patients' outcome influenced by GPs' referral for plain radiography?

For a full listing of back pain related projects funded by the NHS HTA programme, visit [www.nchta.org](http://www.nchta.org)

## Useful organisations

**The British Acupuncture Council** is the UK's main regulatory body for the practice of acupuncture by over 2500 professionally qualified acupuncturists  
[www.acupuncture.org.uk](http://www.acupuncture.org.uk)

**The British Medical Acupuncture Society** is a nationwide group of family doctors and hospital specialists who practice acupuncture alongside more conventional techniques  
[www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk](http://www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk)

**The British Complementary Medicine Association** is an umbrella organisation representing 60 organisations, associations, schools and colleges and operating a code of conduct  
[www.bcma.co.uk](http://www.bcma.co.uk)

**BackCare** (the National Back Pain Association) is an independent national charity that helps people manage and prevent back pain by providing information, promoting self help, encouraging debate and funding research into better back health  
[www.backcare.org.uk](http://www.backcare.org.uk)

**NHS Direct Online** has NHS resources and links relating to back pain and health  
[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

The NHS Health Technology Assessment programme does not offer endorsement for any of the organisations or practices listed in this publication.





## About the NHS HTA programme

The NHS HTA programme is the largest and longest running of the Department of Health's national research programmes. It produces independent research on the effectiveness of healthcare treatments and tests for those who use, manage and work in the NHS. Each year some 50 new studies are published answering questions of direct importance to the NHS,

supporting doctors and nurses in the delivery of best care for patients. HTA research findings directly influence key decision-making bodies such as the National Institute for Health & Clinical Excellence (NICE), and the National Screening Committee, who rely on HTA outputs to raise standards of care.

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NHS Health Technology Assessment programme

# HTA Spotlight

## Acupuncture for back pain



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# Acupuncture better for back pain

New research commissioned by the NHS Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme suggests that acupuncture offers more long term relief from low back pain compared to conventional primary care methods. The £220,000 study: 'Longer term clinical and economic benefits of offering acupuncture care to patients with chronic low back pain' involved a trial during which two different groups of patients were offered either a referral for acupuncture or conventional primary care.

Affecting more than 1.1 million people, back pain is the nation's leading cause of disability and one of the main reasons for work-related sickness absence

The study concluded that those who underwent acupuncture treatment reported significant pain reduction at 24 months over the group who received conventional care, for little extra cost.

## Acupuncture vs conventional care

The objectives of the study led by Kate Thomas, Professor of Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research at the University of Leeds, were to test whether patients aged 18-65 with

## Current advice to doctors from NICE

Current advice to doctors from the National Institute for Health & Clinical Excellence (NICE) states that the majority of patients with acute low back pain can be managed in primary care with:

- ▶ Back exercises/recommendations for keeping fit, doing sports to strengthen muscles, and maintenance of a good posture
- ▶ Painkillers
- ▶ Continuing with normal activities
- ▶ Manipulation if required
- ▶ Bed rest is not recommended

NICE states that patients could, however, be referred to a specialist service if certain signs or symptoms are present, see referral advice [www.nice.org.uk/pdf/Referraladvice.pdf](http://www.nice.org.uk/pdf/Referraladvice.pdf)

persistent non-specific low back pain, when offered access to traditional acupuncture care alongside conventional primary care, gained more long term relief from pain than those offered conventional care only. The study also investigated the safety and acceptability of acupuncture care to patients.

During the trial patients were referred for treatment by 39 GPs, working in 16 practices across York. Patients in the experimental arm were offered the option of referral for treatment at three non-NHS acupuncture clinics, with the other group receiving conventional primary care



from their GP such as physiotherapy, medication and recommended back exercises.

Patients were assessed for bodily pain at three, 12 and 24 month intervals, and a cost assessment exercise was conducted at 24 months. Patients were also assessed for factors such as medication use, pain-free months in the past year, worry about back pain, satisfaction with care received, and safety and acceptability of acupuncture care.

## Longer term pain reduction

Patients receiving acupuncture care reported a significantly greater reduction in worry about their back pain at 12 and 24 months compared with the conventional care group. At 24 months, the acupuncture care group reported less pain and was more likely to report 12 months pain free. Eighty-one per cent of acupuncture patients stated that their allocated treatment had helped their back pain, compared with 52% in

Back pain costs the NHS and community care services more than £1 billion each year: £141 million a year is spent on GP consultations

the conventional care group. The acupuncture service was also found to be cost effective at 24 months, with the estimated cost per quality-adjusted life year £4,241. The NHS costs were greater in the acupuncture group than the conventional group, but the additional resource use was less than the costs of the acupuncture treatment itself, suggesting that some conventional care resource use was offset.

More than 230 patients took part in the study, with 159 receiving acupuncture treatment and

80 receiving 'usual care.' All the patients who were offered acupuncture accepted, receiving an average of eight acupuncture treatments within the trial.

71% of people would like to discuss complementary medicine with their GP, but 38% feel that most GPs disapprove of it

## Acupuncture safe and acceptable

The research team, working from the medical care research unit at the University of Sheffield in partnership with the Foundation for Traditional Chinese Medicine in York, concluded that traditional acupuncture care delivered in a primary care setting is safe and acceptable to patients with non-specific low back pain, and that while acupuncture care and conventional care are both associated with clinically significant improvement at 12 and 24 month follow up, acupuncture care is significantly more effective in reducing bodily pain than conventional care at 24 months.

The report 'Longer term clinical and economic benefits of offering acupuncture care to patients with chronic low back pain' is published in *Health Technology Assessment* 9(32), the internationally acclaimed journal of the NHS Health Technology Assessment programme.

The full text of the research is also available for download free of charge from:  
[www.ncchta.org/execsumm/summ932.htm](http://www.ncchta.org/execsumm/summ932.htm)





## Clinical background

Back pain is a common complaint from which most people suffer at some point during their lives. According to the NHS Direct Online Health Encyclopaedia, most lower back pain is caused not by serious damage or disease, but by sprains, muscle strains, minor injuries, or a pinched or irritated nerve. It can also occur during pregnancy, or because of stress, viral infection, kidney infection, or sleep disorder.

Back pain can also be triggered by every day activities such as awkward bending or lifting. The lower region of the back is the most vulnerable to back pain because it bears the entire weight of the upper body and is used more than other parts of the spine in general movement.

**85% of GPs feel they don't have enough knowledge and information on the safety and efficacy of complementary medicines and would welcome more guidance**

Ninety-five per cent of back pain patients are diagnosed with simple low back pain. There are more serious causes of back pain such as prolapsed disc and degenerative diseases of the spine, but if pain subsides and there are no unusual symptoms such as numbness, 'pins and needles', or pain down the leg, muscle spasm is generally considered to be the cause of pain.

## More HTA research into acupuncture

### **Acupuncture of chronic headache disorders in primary care: randomised controlled trial and economic analysis (Vickers) HTA Vol 8.48**

The study aimed to determine the effects of a policy of using acupuncture, compared with a policy of avoiding acupuncture, on headache in primary care patients with chronic headache disorders. The findings of the study suggest that acupuncture leads to persistent, clinically relevant benefits for primary care patients with chronic headache, particularly migraine. The research team also found that it is relatively cost-effective compared with a number of other interventions provided by the NHS.

Project details: [www.ncchta.org/execsumm/summ848.htm](http://www.ncchta.org/execsumm/summ848.htm)

