

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

A Form of Acupuncture May Help in Opioid Addiction

Transcutaneous electric acupoint stimulation (TEAS), a form of acupuncture that uses skin electrodes to apply electrical stimulation at different points on the body, may help people addicted to opioid drugs, according to researchers at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital near Boston. The study, supported in part by NCCAM and published in the *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, also suggests that combining this technique with prescribed drugs that ease withdrawal symptoms may improve other outcomes for people addicted to opioids.

Participants enrolled in this study (48 male and female patients between 18 and 59 years of age) had a diagnosis of opioid addiction and sought treatment at an inpatient, alcohol and drug abuse treatment program. The participants were randomly assigned to receive three 30-minute treatments of active (actual) or simulated (placebo) TEAS daily for up to 4 days along with their prescribed drugs (a combination of buprenorphine and naloxone) to help ease the symptoms associated with opioid withdrawal, such as nausea, irritability, and insomnia.

Two weeks following discharge, the researchers found that 29 percent of participants who received active TEAS began taking opioid drugs again compared to 65 percent of those who received simulated TEAS. Further, participants who received active TEAS were more than two times less likely to have used *any* drugs than those who received simulated TEAS. In addition, patients in the active TEAS group reported they were less bothered by pain and that they experienced greater improvements in overall health. However, the researchers noted that drug abstinence may have contributed to these improvements.

The researchers noted several limitations of this study, including a small number of participants and brief duration of treatment. Despite these limitations, they suggested that additional studies with larger, more diverse populations and longer treatment durations are needed.

Reference

- Meade CS, Lukas SE, McDonald LJ, et al. [A randomized trial of transcutaneous electric acupoint stimulation as adjunctive treatment for opioid detoxification.](#) *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment.* 2010;38(1):12–21.

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