



Asheville Center for Chinese Medicine

70 Woodfin Place Suite West Wing Two 828.258.2777 Asheville, North Carolina 28801

Info@AcupunctureAsheville.com

www.AcupunctureAsheville.com

Acupuncture Eases Side Effects of AIDS Drugs People Report Less Bloating, Cramping

By [Charlene Laino](#)

WebMD Medical News Reviewed By [Michael Smith, MD](#)
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July 27, 2005 (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) -- Acupuncture may help relieve bloating, cramping, and appetite loss among HIV-infected people taking potent drug cocktails to keep the virus in check. Since they feel better after acupuncture, people are more likely to take their drugs properly, resulting in better disease control, says researcher Elizabeth Sommers, MPH, research director of the AIDS Care Project/Pathways to Wellness in Boston. While powerful AIDS drugs are credited with helping HIV-infected people live longer, the drugs often cause a host of digestive problems, she tells WebMD. "Anything we can do to minimize side effects and maximize adherence to treatment is important," she says. "Acupuncture is one such way." Sommers says that acupuncture is already used to curb digestive side effects in people taking cancer drugs.

Targeted Acupuncture Helps More

The new study, presented here at a meeting of the International AIDS Society, included 50 HIV-infected men and women taking HIV medications. About half had been diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. At the start of the study, all of the participants complained that the drugs caused at least two digestive side effects: Nearly 80% had gas, more than 40% had bloating, 50% had cramps, nearly 50% had appetite loss, and 10% had actually lost weight. The participants then received six weeks of acupuncture. For three weeks the acupuncture included four sites commonly associated with improvement of digestive symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and bowel upset. For another three weeks they received acupuncture at four sites nearby sites not noted for affecting digestive conditions.

The patients were unaware of which type of acupuncture they were receiving at any given time. But after just three weeks of acupuncture treatments, only 60% had two or more digestive symptoms, Sommers says. Both sets of acupuncture points improved digestive symptoms. However, acupuncture at the sites targeting digestive symptoms was more effective in controlling loss of appetite, abdominal cramps, and bloating.

More People Take Their Drugs After Acupuncture

Among the 20% of people who said they weren't taking their AIDS medications as directed at the start of the study, half reported improvement after acupuncture treatment, she says.

None of the participants complained of side effects from the acupuncture. "We're very heartened by the results and are gearing up for a bigger study," Sommers says. Pedro Chequer, MD, director of the National AIDS Program in Brazil, says he welcomes the research. "It's worth a try," he tells WebMD. "Now we need the scientific proof it works so we can offer it to our patients."

Hal Huff, ND, a naturopathic doctor at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine in Toronto, says the results are similar to what he sees in his own practice. "We give acupuncture in conjunction with other treatments such as dietary changes and nutritional supplements, so I can't say for certain whether it's the acupuncture or the whole package that results in improvement," Huff tells WebMD. "But people report fewer digestive problems and improved compliance with their AIDS medications."

SOURCES: 3rd IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis and Treatment, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, July 24-27, 2005. Elizabeth Sommers, MPH, research director, AIDS Care Project/Pathways to Wellness, Boston. Hal Huff, ND, Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine, Toronto.