Acupuncture for Low Back Pain in the Pediatric Patient

Authors: Rosalie Tassone, MD and Yuan-Chi Lin, MD, MPH

Affiliation: Children's Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School

Introduction

Lower back pain is a common symptom in patients seeking medical attention. Lumbago is also not an uncommon complaint in the pediatric population. It is estimated that the prevalence of back pain was low (1%) among 7-year-old and 10-year-old (6%) schoolchildren, but increased with age, being 18% both among 14- and 16-year-old adolescents. Recurrent or chronic pain was reported by 26% of boys and 33% of girls who reported low back pain, and the proportion of recurrent and chronic pains of all low back pain incidents increased with age. [1]

Acupuncture, a modality practiced in China for over 3000 years, has become more popular in the United States since the 1970's. In 1997 the NIH released a consensus statement noting that acupuncture is efficacious in adult postoperative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting and in postoperative dental pain and may be may be a useful adjunct treatment or an acceptable alternative in other situations including low back pain. In a meta-analysis of twelve randomized controlled trials, mainly in adults, acupuncture was found to be superior to various control interventions for the management of lumbago. [2]

Methods

With approval from the Institutional Review Board at Children's Hospital Boston, we reviewed 9 charts of pediatric patients who underwent at least a series of six acupuncture treatments for a primary complaint of low back pain. Patients were asked to rate their pain prior to treatment on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 indicated no pain at all and 10 was the greatest pain they had ever experienced.

Results

Nine patients were followed in a seven year period (1999-2006) with an average age of 16.2 on presentation to the medical acupuncture service for complaint of low back pain. The male to female ratio was 0.67 (3 boys and 6 girls). The average pain score at the first treatment was 5.5 (range 3-8.5). Over time the average pain score decreased, and the average pain score on the sixth visit was 3.78 (range 1-6.5).

Discussion

Our results indicate that treatment with acupuncture over time decreases reported pain scores in pediatric patients. A randomized control trial of 298 patients with low back pain revealed that acupuncture was more effective in improving pain than no acupuncture treatment.[3] Additionally, acupuncture care for low back pain is a cost effective therapy in the long term[4.] We anticipate that similar results occur in the pediatric population, and suggest that further randomized controlled trials evaluating the efficacy and cost-effectiveness for lumbago in the pediatric patient be performed.

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