

# Real acupuncture no better than sham acupuncture for treating hot flushes

January 19 2016, by Jane Gardner

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Women who received both 'fake' and real acupuncture showed the same improvements in symptoms of menopause.

A new study has revealed traditional Chinese acupuncture treatments are no better than fake acupuncture for treating menopause symptoms.

But, in a surprise finding, both the real and sham treatments showed a 40 per cent improvement in the severity and frequency of hot flushes at the end of eight weeks of treatment. The benefits were sustained at six months after treatment.

The University of Melbourne study, funded by the NHMRC and supported by Jean Hailes for Women, is the largest of its kind to date. It was published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese medicine treatment where thin needles are inserted into the body at specific points. A group of 327 Australian [women](#) aged over 40 who had at least seven moderate hot flushes a day, were enrolled into the study.

Half the group was given 10 sessions of standard Chinese medicine [acupuncture](#). The other half received fake or 'sham' acupuncture, that is, stimulation of the skin using blunt-tipped needles, which has a milder effect without penetrating the skin.

Lead author of the study, the University of Melbourne's Dr Carolyn Ee, a general practitioner trained in Chinese medicine, said there were several plausible explanations for the improvement in both groups.

She said the placebo effect is one possible reason and attending a clinic to talk about symptoms could help and that hot flushes tend to improve spontaneously with time.

"This was a large and rigorous study and we are confident there is no additional benefit from inserting needles compared with stimulation from pressuring the blunt needles without skin penetration for hot

flushes," Dr Ee said.

"If women want to consider having acupuncture for hot flushes, they should know that although previous studies show it is better than doing nothing, our study demonstrates that needling does not appear to make a difference".

Women with breast cancer or who have had both ovaries removed were not included in the study. "These women suffer hot flushes that are more severe and often earlier in life, so we think they warrant specific research because [breast cancer](#) survivors can't take Hormone Replacement Therapy," Dr Ee explained.

She stressed that while acupuncture is a relatively safe treatment, women should also discuss other treatment options for their [hot flushes](#) with their doctor.

Previous studies have shown acupuncture is effective for chronic pain, including low back pain, neck pain, and osteoarthritis; tension-type headache; chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting; period pain; and hayfever.

Dr Mandy Deeks, Deputy CEO of Jean Hailes for Women's Health and a psychologist, said the study highlighted the importance of women talking about health issues.

"For women, having someone to discuss their menopausal experiences with is a positive step. We know from research that having a positive relationship with a health professional makes a big difference to health outcomes," Dr Deeks said.

**More information:** Acupuncture for Menopausal Hot Flashes: A Randomized Trial. *Ann Intern Med*. Published online 19 January 2016

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