

FACT SHEET — TREATMENT OPTIONS

Acupuncture for Back Pain

The evidence, mechanisms, and what to expect from acupuncture treatment

Acupuncture involves the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body. It has been used for thousands of years in traditional Chinese medicine and is increasingly integrated into Western musculoskeletal care. NICE guidelines include acupuncture as one treatment option for chronic primary pain, including chronic back pain.

The evidence

A 2012 Cochrane review of over 17,000 patients found acupuncture more effective than no treatment and sham acupuncture for chronic back pain. NICE recommends considering a course of acupuncture for chronic primary pain. The evidence is strongest for pain reduction and functional improvement in chronic conditions; it is weaker for acute back pain.

How acupuncture works

The mechanisms of acupuncture are not fully understood but several are well-supported:

- **Endorphin release** — needle insertion triggers the release of endorphins and other endogenous pain-modulating substances
- **Gate control** — stimulation of sensory nerve fibres modulates pain signal transmission in the spinal cord
- **Central modulation** — fMRI studies show acupuncture produces changes in brain activity in pain-processing regions
- **Local tissue effects** — needle insertion triggers a local response that may reduce muscle tension and improve local circulation

What to expect

The treatment	Fine needles inserted at selected points, typically left in place for 20–30 minutes. Most people feel minimal pain on insertion. A dull aching or tingling sensation (de qi) is considered therapeutically significant.
Number of sessions	Typically 6–12 sessions for chronic back pain. Most people notice some benefit within 4–6 sessions if it is going to help.
Practitioners	Acupuncture is practised by physiotherapists, osteopaths, doctors, and traditional acupuncturists. Look for practitioners accredited by the British Acupuncture Council (BAcC) or with accredited training from their professional body.
Side effects	Minor bruising, temporary soreness. Serious adverse events are rare with properly trained practitioners using single-use sterile needles.

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