

ACUPUNCTURE: Common Side Effects – The Good

Better sleep

Insomnia is one of the most common complaints seen by acupuncturists, and acupuncture can be highly effective at resolving it. But even in people who do not recognize or mention sleep as a problem, acupuncture has a tendency to produce more restful nights. This often goes unnoticed until asked about on a follow-up visit. Many acupuncturists hear this refrain multiple times a day: “You know, now that you mention it, I have been sleeping a lot better since I started coming for acupuncture.”

More energy

Although it’s common to find yourself in “acu land”—a somewhat dazed, blissfully relaxed state—immediately following acupuncture treatment, the after effect is usually increased energy. Many people report having more energy in the hours, days and even weeks after acupuncture treatment. You may notice that you’re avoiding that post-lunch coma, feeling more motivated to hit the gym, or just sensing a little extra spring in your step.

Mental clarity

Acupuncture resolves the stagnation that causes many of us to feel physically and mentally lethargic. In addition to the surge of physical energy that follows emerging from acu land, many people notice improved mental clarity. They’re able to make decisions faster, with greater confidence. They feel more motivated and resolute about tackling items that have been lingering for months on their to-do lists. It’s as if the mental cobwebs have been cleared out. Suddenly, you’re able to get out of your own way.

Better digestion

Digestion is big in acupuncture. The organ systems and meridians that regulate digestion are intimately connected to all other structures and functions throughout the body, so a person’s digestive health says a lot about the overall state of health. It’s also why getting acupuncture for shoulder pain, for example, might cause you to use the bathroom more regularly, feel less bloated after meals, and experience fewer food cravings.

Less stress

Stress reduction is a common reason for seeking acupuncture. However, not everyone admits or even feels that they have stress in their life. They’ve gotten so used to living with a certain level of stress that it has become their “normal.” It’s only in the absence of stress that they notice how stressed out they were to begin with. Acupuncture heightens our awareness such that stressful events, initially, can actually be felt more acutely. But overtime, by evening out our moods, acupuncture allows us to feel less affected by and better equipped to manage the stressful aspects of our lives.

ACUPUNCTURE: Common Side Effects – The Unpleasant

Initial Worsening of Symptoms

While most people notice a marked improvement in their symptoms following acupuncture, some feel worse before they start feeling better. In natural medicine circles this is sometimes referred to as a healing crisis. The idea is that as your body starts undergoing the changes involved in moving toward health, things get stirred up. This can cause not only an exacerbation of current symptoms but also the recurrence of previous ailments that had been dormant.

Acupuncture awakens your self-healing capabilities. With that can come an onslaught of bodily awareness. This usually is a positive experience but it also can mean heightened sensitivity or intolerance for things that previously felt normal. An example of this is someone who unconsciously adapts to stress by tightening and hunching up his shoulders. After an acupuncture treatment, once this person's bodily felt sense has been woken up, his mild upper back and neck tension might start screaming.

The good news about this side effect is that it's a sign that things are moving. In the case of acupuncture, this means that the primary objective is being met. That is, you are starting to transition on multiple levels from stuck to unstuck.

Fatigue

People can feel wiped out after acupuncture. A more common result is increased energy but sometimes the "acu land" effect hangs on a little longer. This is your body telling you that it's depleted. Feeling fatigued after acupuncture is not cause for concern but it is a warning sign that you need to rest.

If you have this experience, take it easy for the remainder of the day. Take a bath that night. Go to bed early. Come morning, the combination of acupuncture and rest will leave you feeling born again.

Soreness

Body parts where acupuncture needles get inserted can feel sore after needles are removed. This most commonly occurs with points in the hands and feet, especially *LI 4*, an acupuncture point located between the thumb and index finger.

Soreness from acupuncture typically dissipates within 24 hours. However, big trigger point releases can cause residual soreness that lasts a few days. Most acupuncturists will warn you about this before you leave your appointment.

Bruising

Although less common than soreness, bruising can occur at the needling site. Sometimes bruising is the result of a hematoma, a localized collection of blood that gets initiated when the needle punctures the skin. These will commonly resolve within a few days to a week.

Muscle twitching

People may experience involuntary muscle twitching during or after acupuncture.

Muscle twitching is different from full-on muscle spasm. If during or after an acupuncture treatment you feel that one of your muscles is acutely spasming, especially if it's a muscle that was just needed, tell your acupuncturist. He or she may be able to release it before you go on your merry way.

Lightheadedness

This is pretty rare but it can happen—and on very rare occasions, post-acupuncture lightheadedness can result in fainting. Getting up quickly from the acupuncture table can cause lightheadedness, as can coming for acupuncture on an empty stomach. Remember that eating is one of the key things to remember before an acupuncture appointment.

When your acupuncture session is over, take your time getting up and move gently as you gather your things to leave. If you find yourself feeling lightheaded after the treatment, sit in your acupuncturist's waiting room for a few minutes and take some deep breaths. Acupuncture can be a physically and emotionally intense experience, and sometimes our bodies are not fully recovered at exactly the moment our hour is up. It is okay if you need a little extra time.

Emotional release

Sometimes people cry in acupuncture. Not because they're in pain but because their emotions, which often get stifled while powering through life, become free flowing. The emotional release that can happen in acupuncture usually is a positive experience, but it can be surprising, especially for people who tend to be more emotionally stoical.

Feeling extra sensitive or tear prone in an acupuncture session, or in the days that follow, is completely normal. It's also a sign that the acupuncture is working. Even if you're seeking acupuncture for a physical ailment, increased emotional expression is an indication that healing is happening. From an acupuncture perspective, physical and emotional health are interconnected, so emotional shifts suggest forthcoming physical changes as well.

While these side effects are rarely cause for concern, you know your body best. If any of the above side effects feel like they're too severe or lasting too long—or if you notice any additional negative reactions to an acupuncture treatment—please do not hesitate to contact us.