Acupuncture for tension-type headache.

BACKGROUND: Acupuncture is often used for tension-type headache prophylaxis but its effectiveness is still controversial. This review (along with a companion review on 'Acupuncture for migraine prophylaxis') represents an updated version of a Cochrane review originally published in Issue 1, 2001, of The Cochrane Library.

OBJECTIVES: To investigate whether acupuncture is a) more effective than no prophylactic treatment/routine care only; b) more effective than 'sham' (placebo) acupuncture; and c) as effective as other interventions in reducing headache frequency in patients with episodic or chronic tension-type headache.

SEARCH STRATEGY: The Cochrane Pain, Palliative& Supportive Care Trials Register, CENTRAL, MEDLINE, EMBASE and the Cochrane Complementary Medicine Field Trials Register were searched to January 2008.

SELECTION CRITERIA: We included randomized trials with a post-randomization observation period of at least 8 weeks that compared the clinical effects of an acupuncture intervention with a control (treatment of acute headaches only or routine care), a sham acupuncture intervention or another intervention in patients with episodic or chronic tension-type headache.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS: Two reviewers checked eligibility; extracted information on patients, interventions, methods and results; and assessed risk of bias and quality of the acupuncture intervention. Outcomes extracted included response (at least
50% reduction of headache frequency; outcome of primary interest), headache days, pain intensity and analgesic use. MAIN RESULTS: Eleven trials with 2317 participants (median 62, range 10 to 1265) met the inclusion criteria. Two large trials compared acupuncture to treatment of acute headaches or routine care only. Both found statistically significant and clinically relevant short-term (up to 3 months) benefits of acupuncture over control for response, number of headache days and pain intensity. Long-term effects (beyond 3 months) were not investigated. Six trials compared acupuncture with a sham acupuncture intervention, and five of the six provided data for meta-analyses. Small but statistically significant benefits of acupuncture over sham were found for response as well as for several other outcomes. Three of the four trials comparing acupuncture with physiotherapy, massage or relaxation had important methodological or reporting shortcomings. Their findings are difficult to interpret, but collectively suggest slightly better results for some outcomes in the control groups. AUTHORS’ CONCLUSIONS: In the previous version of this review, evidence in support of acupuncture for tension-type headache was considered insufficient. Now, with six additional trials, the authors conclude that acupuncture could be a valuable non-pharmacological tool in patients with frequent episodic or chronic tension-type headaches.