

Acupuncture in VA - Fact Sheet

Integrative Health Coordinating Center
VHA Office of Patient Centered Care & Cultural Transformation

Definitions:

Acupuncture is one of several techniques that make up the system of care provided by those trained in traditional medicine from China and other Asian countries. Acupuncture may refer to this whole system approach to healthcare or define the technique of acupuncture treatment. Most frequently we think of acupuncture as the penetration of thin needles into the body at acupuncture points to effect a change. Acupuncture is used to restore or maintain health.

Background and Policy on in VA

Acupuncture is one of the complementary and integrative health (CIH) approaches within the VHA Whole Health System of care included in VHA Directive 1137 – Provision of Complementary and Integrative Health, published in May 2017. This allows acupuncture care to be covered by the Veteran’s medical benefits package, when clinically necessary, as determined by the patient’s care team.

In February 2018 a Qualification Standard was published that permitted licensed acupuncturists to be hired to provide acupuncture care at VA Medical Centers (VAMC).

Acupuncture Safety and Effectiveness

Acupuncture is often associated with pain management, but it is also may be useful for other conditions, and the body of literature for acupuncture effectiveness is growing. Acupuncture may be effective as a stand-alone treatment or as an adjunctive treatment to other medical interventions.

An evidence map of acupuncture was developed by VA Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D) in 2014. This systematic review identified evidence of potentially positive effect for several pain conditions, including chronic pain and headaches, mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and PTSD, and wellness indicators such as insomnia.

Acupuncture is generally considered safe when practiced by appropriately trained acupuncture providers.

<https://www.hsr.d.research.va.gov/publications/esp/acupuncture.cfm>

Occupational Guidance

Many providers may be able to perform acupuncture at a VAMC. Comprehensive acupuncture is practiced by licensed acupuncturists, medical acupuncturists, and chiropractic acupuncturists. Depending on state scope of practice, additional providers such as RNs, PTs and pharmacists may be eligible to become certified providers for limited acupuncture protocols like Battlefield Acupuncture (BFA). BFA is an auricular (ear) acupuncture protocol that is used for acute or chronic pain.

All VA providers who offer acupuncture services either on station or in the community must meet training requirements based on their scope of practice so that acupuncture quality remains high.



Treatment Guidance:

Most frequently acupuncture is used for pain, although many other conditions may respond well to acupuncture. Evidence informed clinical decision-making is recommended. Subject matter experts have developed guidance for both internal and external provision of acupuncture care.

Many veterans who are seeking acupuncture for pain do well with Battlefield Acupuncture. Since a facility can train their current workforce to provide BFA, access to this limited acupuncture treatment may be implemented quickly where there is a high need.

Internal: Frequency and duration of acupuncture treatment is determined by the local acupuncture provider based on patient needs. Frequency & Duration Guidelines are available for internal providers.

External: Under certain circumstances acupuncture care will be delivered in the community. When care is delivered outside the VAMC, the acupuncture [Standardized Episodes of Care \(SEOC\)](#) are used to inform treatment frequency and duration.

Online Resources

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health page on acupuncture:

<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/acupuncture/introduction>

Whole Health Library Acupuncture Section:

<https://wholehealth.wisc.edu/tools/acupuncture-and-pain/>

VA Community Care:

<https://www.va.gov/communitycare/>

For more information on Whole Health and CIH in VA visit:

VHA Directive 1137: Provision of Complementary and Integrative Health:

https://www.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub_ID=5401