

# Acupuncture for Migraine and Tension Headache

**This leaflet explains more about acupuncture for migraine and tension headache, including the benefits, risks and any alternatives and what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.**

## **What is acupuncture?**

Acupuncture has been used in China for over 3,000 years and western research has also shown that acupuncture can be effective in reducing pain.

How it works is not entirely clear but it is thought to stimulate the production of naturally occurring substances that give pain relief. The gentle movement of the acupuncture needles during the treatment has also been shown to suppress pain transmission.

## **Why should I have acupuncture?**

Your doctor will have referred you for acupuncture because normal medicines for headache have not helped you or you are unable to take them.

Most people can have acupuncture but there are a few cases where people cannot and your physiotherapist will ask you some questions to check if acupuncture is right for you.

## **Why might I not be able to have acupuncture?**

Tell the physiotherapist if you:

- are pregnant or trying to conceive
- have a fear or phobia of needles

- have a poor or infected skin condition such as eczema
- have any metal allergies
- have any open wounds, cuts, bruises or grazes
- have a bleeding disorder such as haemophilia
- have a pacemaker or heart condition
- have epilepsy
- have immuno-deficiency such as HIV
- have diabetes
- have had surgery to your head
- have a cranial shunt
- are taking anticoagulants to thin your blood.

**Please also tell the physiotherapist if you are taking any medicines or tablets.**

### **What are the risks?**

Acupuncture may have a few side effects which are mild and temporary.

Patients sometimes notice a small area of bruising around the needle points or light headedness or sleepiness following the treatment. These normally clear quickly.

The sterilised needles are used once and then thrown away and the physiotherapist follows strict hygiene guidelines.

### **Asking for your consent**

It is important that you feel involved in decisions about your care. For some treatments, you will be asked to sign a consent form to say that you agree to have the treatment and understand what it involves. You can withdraw your consent at any time, even if you have said 'yes' previously. If you would like more details about our consent process, please ask for a copy of our policy.

## **What happens during acupuncture?**

Treatment involves inserting fine acupuncture needles into the skin at certain points on the body. The needle is tapped into place very lightly and the tip of the needle is just under the skin. It is then usually left in position for a short time and may be moved slightly by the physiotherapist to improve the effect.

The number of needles used and the number of treatment sessions will vary from patient to patient.

The treatment lasts about 20 minutes.

## **Will I feel any pain?**

When the needle enters the skin, you will feel a mild pin prick. This should only give you temporary discomfort.

Sometimes your symptoms may feel worse as the treatment starts working. This should clear quickly. If you feel uncomfortable, please tell the physiotherapist during the treatment.

## **What happens after acupuncture?**

After the treatment some people feel sleepy or light-headed.

If this is the case you should not drive immediately afterwards so think about how you will get home after your appointment.

## **What do I need to do after I go home?**

You can continue your usual activities as normal. If the treatment has worsened your symptoms, then manage your headache or migraine as you have been advised to by your consultant or doctor.

## **Will I have a follow-up appointment?**

Your follow up appointment will be with the clinician who referred you to the acupuncture service.

## Useful sources of information

### The Migraine Trust and Migraine Action

<https://www.migrainetrust.org/tag/migraine-action/>

### Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists

[www.aacp.org.uk](http://www.aacp.org.uk)

### NICE Guideline CG150: Headaches in over 12s, diagnosis and management.

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about acupuncture for migraine, please contact the headache service on 020 8725 4630 (Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm). Out of hours, please email [headache@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:headache@stgeorges.nhs.uk).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)

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## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health. **Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111

## AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website ([www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



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