

Acupuncture Cuts Ails of Breast Cancer Drugs

Acupuncture Reduces Side Effects From Tamoxifen, Arimidex

By [Daniel J. DeNoon](#) WebMD Health News Reviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#)

Sept. 22, 2008 -- Acupuncture eases the hot flashes and night sweats common in women taking tamoxifen and Arimidex after [breast cancer treatment](#).

In a clinical trial, acupuncture helped hot flashes as much as Effexor, the [antidepressant](#) currently prescribed for women suffering the menopausal side effects of anti-estrogen drugs.

Effexor itself has troubling side effects, but acupuncture doesn't, says study leader Eleanor Walker, MD, a radiation oncologist at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital.

"With acupuncture you can get a treatment for those hot flashes that can alleviate them equal to drug therapy -- without side effects and with improved quality of life," Walker tells WebMD.

Acupuncture is a technique from Chinese medicine. It involves the usually painless process of placing extremely thin needles into the skin along specific "acupuncture points."

Acupuncturists think of these points as nodes where lines of bodily energy converge, although these lines of energy do not correspond to any actual physical structures known to Western medicine.

Walker and colleagues studied 47 women receiving either tamoxifen or Arimidex after breast cancer treatment. Each woman suffered at least 14 hot flashes a week.

Half the women were treated with Effexor for 12 weeks; the other half received acupuncture. The two groups had similar, significant decreases in hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms. Both groups also had fewer [symptoms of depression](#).

But women taking Effexor also had negative side effects. These included nausea, dry mouth, headache, difficulty sleeping, dizziness, double vision, increased [blood pressure](#), constipation, fatigue, anxiety, feeling "spaced out," and body jerking during the night.

Women getting acupuncture had none of these side effects, but they did report increases in energy, clarity of thought, sexual desire, and overall well-being.

The findings don't surprise licensed acupuncturist Janet Konefal, PhD, assistant dean for complementary and [integrative medicine](#) at the University of Miami.

"We have had full-time, licensed acupuncturists at our cancer center for almost a decade," Konefal tells WebMD.

Konefal says acupuncturists help cancer patients deal not only with anti-estrogen therapy, but also with the troubling side effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

"Acupuncture is a way to help regulate the body and enhance what it would normally do," she says. "If you are taking a medication to alter a condition, acupuncture is not going to override that. It is going to support the system to help it better handle that treatment."

Walker says that most major cancer centers now have integrative medicine departments that offer acupuncture.

"Obviously people are recognizing the benefit," Walker says. "Women need to talk to their insurance companies and push them to cover the cost -- to say, 'Look, here is a viable treatment that is less expensive than drug therapy.' And they need to tell their doctors they want this type of treatment."

Acupuncture and Sexual Function

Most women suffering hot flashes aren't taking breast cancer drugs -- they're undergoing menopause. Acupuncture can help these women too, Walker and Konefal say.

"What we are looking for is for women undergoing menopause to feel vital and healthy and to go through what would be difficult with a lot more ease," Konefal says.

And improved sexual function is part of this restored vitality.

"Acupuncture can help women with this," Konefal says. "It can increase blood flow to an area of the body. One thing acupuncture now is used for is [fertility](#). When women get in vitro insemination, they can get acupuncture before and after to increase blood flow to the uterus and ovaries and increase their chances of a normal [pregnancy](#)."

Men, too, can improve their sexual function with acupuncture treatment. Walker says acupuncture can ease the side effects of chemical castration -- androgen-deprivation therapy -- in men treated for [prostate cancer](#).

Walker is presenting her findings in a presentation to the 50th annual meeting of the American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology, held Sept. 21-25, in Boston.

SOURCES:

American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology annual meeting, Boston, Sept. 21-25, 2008. News release, American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology.

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