

Acupuncture for Chronic Low Back Pain in Older Adults

Study findings suggest acupuncture can be a safe and effective treatment for older adults with chronic low back pain.

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Chronic low back pain is pain in the lower back that lasts longer than 12 weeks. It affects over one-third of older adults nationwide. Commonly used treatments include pain management medications and heat or ice therapy.

Previous studies have found that acupuncture can help reduce or eliminate back pain and discomfort. Acupuncture is the practice of a traditional Chinese medicine technique in which thin needles are inserted into the skin at specific points. However, the optimal use of acupuncture in older adults with chronic low back pain hasn't been well studied.

To fill this gap, a team lead by Drs. Lynn DeBar and Andrea Cook at Kaiser Permanente launched a large randomized clinical trial called BackInAction. The team enrolled 800 adults ages 65 or older who had low back pain for at least three months. Participants were divided into three groups.

One received usual medical care, which generally involved prescribed medications and physical therapy. Another received standard acupuncture of 8 to 15 sessions over 12 weeks in addition to their usual medical care. The third group received enhanced acupuncture, which entailed four to six additional acupuncture sessions over the 12 weeks.

Participants submitted self-assessed results, based on their back pain and physical limitations, at intervals of 3, 6, and 12 months. Results were published in [JAMA Network Open](#) on September 2, 2025.

The study showed that participants receiving standard or enhanced acupuncture fared better than those receiving usual medical care alone. At the six-month and 12-month assessments, both acupuncture groups had less disability from pain. The acupuncture groups also had reduced pain intensity and greater physical function after six months. Acupuncture treatment was associated with fewer anxiety symptoms as well. Adverse effects were few and similar between groups.

The study design was restricted to acupuncture techniques that are approved for Medicare reimbursement. These involved needling only and focused on acupoints targeting the relief of low back pain. This approach could prove to be a valuable treatment for older adults with chronic low

back pain.

“Of the different treatments we have for chronic low back pain, most have a somewhat modest effect. They often reduce pain by about a third at best and can help people function better,” DeBar explains. “Our clinical results suggest that acupuncture is working as well as many things that are more familiar to people. We found that the size of this effect, while modest, was positive and sustained.”

Cook adds, “Older adults often are dealing with other medical problems in addition to back pain. Acupuncture offers a less invasive option that has a better safety profile than a lot of the common treatments for back pain in older adults.”

The team is currently working on an analysis of the cost-effectiveness of acupuncture compared to usual medical care.

This [research summary](#) was published by the Food and Drug Administration/National Institutes of Health on November 19, 2025.