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Acupuncture may help alleviate vulvar pain in women

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Acupuncture has been successfully used to treat such ailments as back and neck pain, osteoarthritis and headaches. Judith Schlaeger is working to discover whether it can help the up to 14 million American women who experience genital pain.

Schlaeger, assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago's College of Nursing, has received a \$2 million, five-year grant from the National Institute of Health's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to study whether acupuncture can treat vulvodynia, a women's chronic pain condition.

Rendering sexual intercourse nearly impossible, vulvodynia's symptoms include pain of the vulva and dyspareunia (pain with intercourse).

Acupuncture, the most common modality of traditional Chinese medicine, is a technique where practitioners stimulate specific acupuncture points on the body, mostly by inserting thin needles through the skin. Results of a number of studies suggest it has been beneficial in reducing pain.

In Schlaeger's latest research, 88 women with vulvodynia will be divided equally into two groups, with each receiving a different acupuncture protocol. Schlaeger developed the protocols with renowned acupuncturist Nobuaki Takakura, whom she trained with in Japan two years ago.

The women will receive two treatments per week for five weeks. Thirteen needles will be used at various points on the body; none in the genitalia, Schlaeger said. Prior to the start and at the end of the study, the women's vulvar discomfort will be recorded using a computerized pain reporting tool developed by former UIC and current University of Florida nursing professor Diana Wilkie.

"I believe the subjects will experience a reduction in pain, and once we discover that, we want to find out how long the effect lasts," said Schlaeger, a certified nurse midwife and licensed acupuncturist. She is the first researcher

to conduct a NIH-sponsored study to determine whether acupuncture is a viable treatment option for vulvodynia. She recently concluded a smaller study involving 36 women that found a significant reduction in vulvar pain and painful sexual intercourse and an increase in overall sexual function. Participants were given a 13-needle treatment twice a week for five weeks.

Women can suffer from vulvodynia for years, and the diagnosis can be "life-shattering," Schlaeger said. "Women may view themselves as inadequate and feel shame if they have pain in their genitals. This is why many women don't want to discuss it, even with a health care provider. Often times they just grin and bear it." Difficulties in having sexual intercourse may cause intimate relationships to become strained, she said.

According to a previous NIH-funded Harvard University study, 60 percent of affected women consult three or more doctors before receiving a diagnosis of vulvodynia. Forty percent of women seeking treatment are not accurately diagnosed after seeing as many as three doctors, the study said.

"No one really knows how to treat it," Schlaeger said. "Our goal is to find a treatment that will ease a woman's pain."

Source:

<https://today.uic.edu/acupuncture-could-ease-womens-vulvar-pain>
