

Annals of Internal Medicine

ESTABLISHED IN 1927 BY THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

Original Research | 3 November 2015

Alexander Technique Lessons or Acupuncture Sessions for Persons With Chronic Neck Pain: A Randomized Trial

Hugh MacPherson, BSc, PhD; Helen Tilbrook, BSc, MSc; Stewart Richmond, BSc, MSc, PhD; Julia Woodman, BSc, PhD; Kathleen Ballard, BSc, PhD; Karl Atkin, BA, DPhil; Martin Bland, BSc, PhD; Janet Eldred, BA, PhD; Holly Essex, MSc, PhD; Catherine Hewitt, BSc, MSc, PhD; Ann Hopton, RGN, BSc, MSc; Ada Keding, BSc, MSc; Harriet Lansdown, MSc; Steve Parrott, BSc, MSc; David Torgerson, MSc, PhD; Aniela Wenham, PhD; and Ian Watt, BSc, MB, ChB, MPH

Ann Intern Med. 2015;163(9):653-662. doi:10.7326/M15-0667

Background: Management of chronic neck pain may benefit from additional active self-care-oriented approaches.

Objective: To evaluate clinical effectiveness of Alexander Technique lessons or acupuncture versus usual care for persons with chronic, nonspecific neck pain.

Design: Three-group randomized, controlled trial. (Current Controlled Trials: ISRCTN15186354)

Setting: U.K. primary care.

Participants: Persons with neck pain lasting at least 3 months, a score of at least 28% on the Northwick Park Questionnaire (NPQ) for neck pain and associated disability, and no serious underlying pathology.

Intervention: 12 acupuncture sessions or 20 one-to-one Alexander lessons (both 600 minutes total) plus usual care versus usual care alone.

Measurements: NPQ score (primary outcome) at 0, 3, 6, and 12 months (primary end point) and Chronic Pain Self-Efficacy Scale score, quality of life, and adverse events (secondary outcomes).

Results: 517 patients were recruited, and the median duration of neck pain was 6 years. Mean attendance was 10 acupuncture sessions and 14 Alexander lessons. Between-group reductions in NPQ score at 12 months versus usual care were 3.92 percentage points for acupuncture (95% CI, 0.97 to 6.87 percentage points) ($P = 0.009$) and 3.79 percentage points for Alexander lessons (CI, 0.91 to 6.66 percentage points) ($P = 0.010$). The 12-month reductions in NPQ score from baseline were 32% for acupuncture and 31% for Alexander lessons. Participant self-efficacy improved for both interventions versus usual care at 6 months ($P < 0.001$) and was significantly associated ($P < 0.001$) with 12-month NPQ score reductions (acupuncture, 3.34 percentage points [CI, 2.31 to 4.38 percentage points]; Alexander lessons, 3.33 percentage points [CI, 2.22 to 4.44 percentage points]). No reported serious adverse events were considered probably or definitely related to either intervention.

Limitation: Practitioners belonged to the 2 main U.K.-based professional associations, which may limit generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion: Acupuncture sessions and Alexander Technique lessons both led to significant reductions in neck pain and associated disability compared with usual care at 12 months. Enhanced self-efficacy may partially explain why longer-term benefits were sustained.

Primary Funding Source: Arthritis Research UK.