

Auricular acupuncture as a potential therapy for opioid detoxification

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A worsening opioid epidemic over the last two decades has created a public health emergency in the United States. Individuals, families, and communities have all been affected by a perfect storm of aggressive marketing, availability of drugs, and inappropriate prescribing that has led to a nation of dependence. This opioid crisis has caused distressing inclines in morbidity and mortality with drug overdose deaths now exceeding the number of fatalities caused by motor vehicles accidents [1,2]. Additional sequela includes a rise in HIV and Hepatitis C due to intravenous drug use as well as disrupted community and family dynamics [3]. The economic burden associated with increased health care, substance misuse treatment, and criminal justice is estimated to be \$78.5 billion [4].

Providers are now seeking alternatives to opioids and must assist patients in weaning off these medications. Patients undergoing opioid detoxification may experience a multitude of symptoms including worsening pain, craving, agitation, anxiety, diarrhea, and muscle spasms [5,6]. This often complicates completion of the opioid detoxification program and leads to attrition, creating a downward spiral of other consequences related to mental health, physical health, and daily function.

Standard detoxification programs utilize a long acting opioid, most commonly buprenorphine or methadone, or patients are slowly weaned off the opioid with gradual tapers [7–9]. Additionally, rescue medications (NSAIDs, muscle relaxers, antidepressants, clonidine) and other disciplines such as pain psychology may be prescribed during the detoxification process [10]. Auricular acupuncture has demonstrated to be effective in treating many addictions such as heroin, opioids, and cocaine; but has not been studied as an outpatient symptomatic treatment in the chronic pain patient [11–13]. This therapy, following the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) protocol, is a cost effective and feasible technique implemented in 5 points of the ear [13]. Future studies should examine the addition of acupuncture to help ease the detoxification experience and promote cessation of opioids.

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