

Addressing Pain in South Carolina

Quick Reference #5

Talking to Your Patients About Complementary Health Approaches for Chronic Pain

I read an interesting article about acupuncture. What do you think about me trying it?

Well, let me tell you about the safety and evidence for acupuncture.

Many Patients Consider Complementary Health Approaches for Chronic Pain

Many people are using complementary approaches for managing their health. In fact, anywhere from 25% to 60% of patients with chronic pain use complementary and alternative medicine therapies.¹ This quick reference will inform you about the current evidence of safety and possible benefits of these approaches so—when encountered with questions similar to the one above—you can more effectively discuss them with your patients and help them mitigate any risks for or possible interactions with conventional treatments.

Let patients know that, despite the popularity of many complementary approaches, evidence of their effectiveness is emerging and that these approaches still lack the evidentiary basis to be considered standard of care for any condition; thus, these therapies may not be covered by health insurance, because coverage is typically based on therapies that meet rigorous, evidence-based medical standards. Patients should be advised to check their health plan's website or member materials for coverage or discount information.

What Do We Know About the Safety of Complementary Approaches?

There is enough evidence for these select complementary and mind-body approaches to be considered generally safe, although these approaches aren't risk-free for all patients. It's important to remember that special circumstances (e.g., pregnancy) and a patient's comorbid medical conditions can affect the safety of these approaches. General safety considerations for each approach are listed below in brief; click the links to learn more.

- **Acupuncture**—Few complications when using sterile needles and treatment is delivered properly.
- **Massage therapy**—Risk is low, with rare reports of serious side effects (e.g., blood clot, fracture).

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Managing Chronic Pain in Adults With or in Recovery From Substance Use Disorders*. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 54. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4671. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

OPIOID RISK PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP



- **Meditation**—Generally considered safe; rare reports of symptoms worsening in people with anxiety and depression.
- **Spinal manipulation**—Relatively safe when performed by a trained and licensed practitioner.
- **Tai chi and qi gong**—Generally safe and unlikely to result in serious injury.
- **Yoga**—Considered safe for healthy people when performed properly under the guidance of a qualified instructor.²

What Is the Scientific Evidence for These Methods?

Evidence suggests that some complementary approaches can help manage certain types of pain. A very brief overview is provided below; click the links for research related to these approaches on several types of pain conditions, like low-back pain, headache, osteoarthritis, and more.

- **Acupuncture**—Results from a number of studies suggest efficacy for treating some chronic pain conditions and relief for some headache pain.
- **Massage**—Evidence varies by type of pain.
- **Mindfulness meditation**—Evidence suggests that meditation may help ease symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome and flare-ups in people who have had ulcerative colitis.
- **Tai chi and qi gong**—Some evidence shows that tai chi may help relieve pain associated with knee osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, and back pain. Qi gong may offer some benefit for chronic neck pain, but results are mixed.
- **Yoga**—This activity may benefit people with chronic low-back pain.²

Wrapping Up the Conversation

Consider directing your patients to learn more about complementary health approaches through the [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health](https://nccih.nih.gov/health/pain/chronic.htm) website.



²National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. (2018). *Chronic Pain: In Depth*. <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/pain/chronic.htm>. Accessed May 16, 2018.