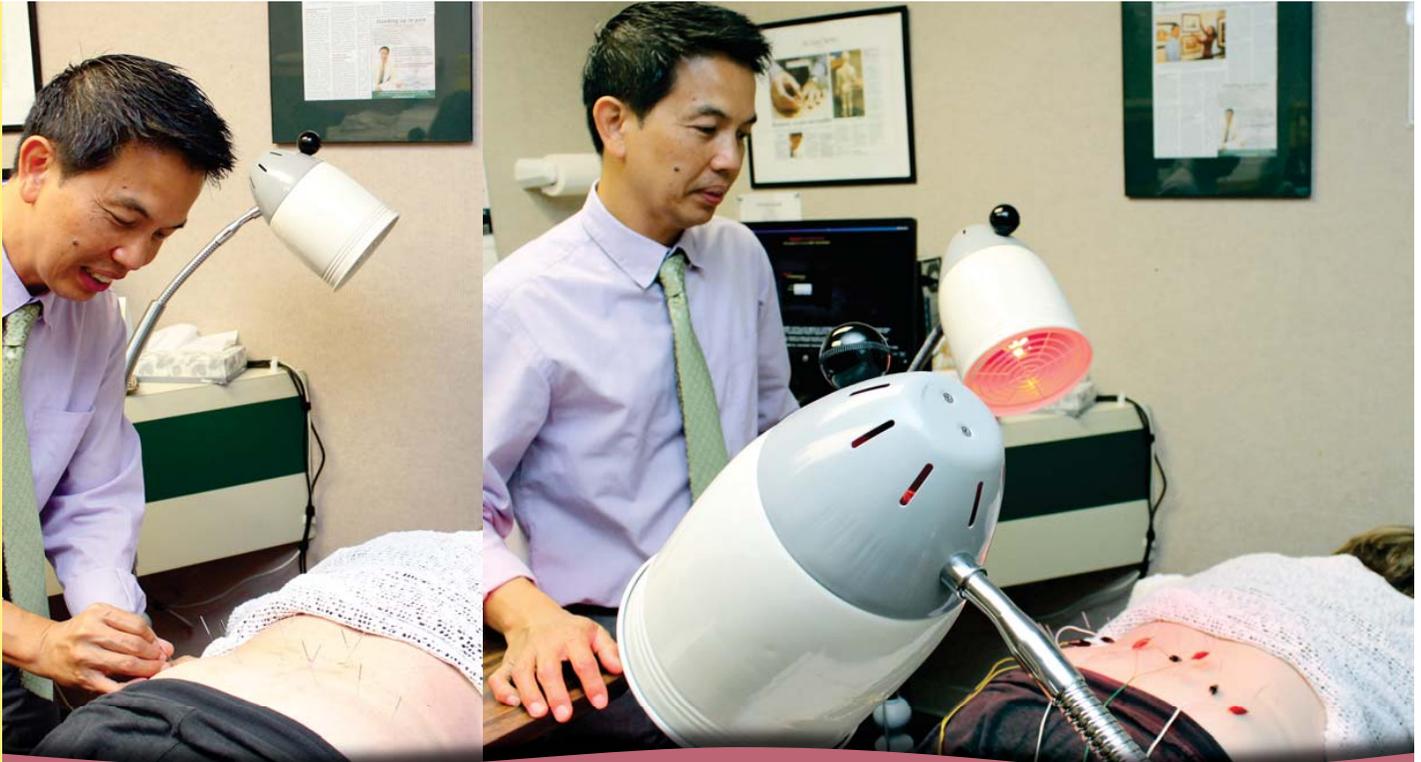


ORTHOPEDICS & PAIN



*Special
Feature-*

Live life less interrupted.



Dr. Ton-That, a physiatrist with Lancaster Neuroscience & Spine Associates, inserts acupuncture needles in a patient with lower back pain. After inserting the needles, electrical stimulators are connected to the needles and infrared heat is directed at the needles for approximately 20 minutes to effectively relieve back pain.

acupuncture and physical therapy for pain management

Written by **KATIE MARKEY MCLAUGHLIN**

FOR MANY AMERICANS, PHYSICAL PAIN IS AN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE.

One national survey found that more than 25 percent of U.S. adults have recently dealt with some sort of pain lasting longer than a day. Another report states that chronic pain—often defined as pain lasting longer than six months—currently affects about 100 million American adults.

Many of those suffering are baby boomers who are continuing to work hard and play hard even as they age. Effective pain management is essential to staying active and continuing to engage in everyday activities.

The good news is that there are several treatment options beyond

relying solely on over-the-counter or prescription pain medicines. Two of those options are acupuncture and physical therapy.

Acupuncture for Pain Management

As part of traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture is one of the world's oldest healing practices. The ancient theory behind the practice is that inserting thin needles through the skin at specific points on the body helps to regulate the body's energy flow.

"Traditional Chinese medicine bases everything on energies," explained Dr. Tony Ton-That, a physiatrist with

Lancaster Neuroscience & Spine Associates.

The practice is becoming increasingly common in America: A national survey found that 3.1 million Americans had used acupuncture in the last year, mostly to relieve back, joint, and neck pain.

From the perspective of a physician, the insertion of the acupuncture needles stimulates the brain to produce endorphins, which are the body's own pain-killing hormones. The release of endorphins can relax the body while increasing circulation and decreasing inflammation.

“It stimulates the body to produce more anti-inflammatory cells,” said Ton-That. “Instead of taking more pain medication, you can use your body’s own chemicals to control inflammation.”

The most common pain conditions for which patients seek acupuncture treatment are acute and chronic back, neck, and shoulder pain; joint pain as a result of arthritis; and migraines.

For some, acupuncture is an appealing option for pain management because it is noninvasive and less risky than many medicines and medical procedures.

“The side effect is almost zero,” said Ton-That. The patient could experience a flare-up from the needle, but even that is rare, he explained.

It’s important to remember that acupuncture can be used in conjunction

with standard Western techniques. Ton-That views acupuncture as just one tool to offer patients for pain control—one part of the whole regimen, which often includes medicine and lifestyle changes such as increased exercise, weight reduction, diet modifications, and smoking cessation.

One of the key results patients can expect with acupuncture is a better night’s sleep, which is vital for pain management.

“Pain is a vicious cycle,” said Ton-That. “If you’re in pain, you can’t sleep, and if you don’t sleep well, you don’t have the energy to deal with the pain. You have to break that cycle.”

He recommends patients not wait to try acupuncture until after they’ve tried a host of other treatments and techniques.

“People often see acupuncture as a

last resort,” he said. “If they try it sooner, they can get rid of the pain quicker.”

Physical Therapy for Pain Management

When people are suffering from pain conditions, often the last thing they want to do is move. But in many cases, the less people move, the more pain they feel. That’s why physical therapy can play a vital role in pain management and treatment.

As its name suggests, physical therapy is the treatment of a disease or injury through physical methods—like exercise and massage—as opposed (or in addition) to medications and surgery. Physical therapists focus on helping patients decrease the pain they feel when completing their daily physical activities, like walking or climbing stairs.

Shown below are a few of the physical therapy techniques used at Drayer Physical Therapy Institute. From left: Kaitlin Milligan, DPT, challenges Jeanie Collins’ balance negotiating over hurdles; assesses Collins’ directional preference for spinal stenosis; and Milligan guards Collins as she walks with a narrow base of support to challenge her dynamic standing balance.



Physical therapy is effective for pain management because it builds endurance, strengthens muscles, and increases flexibility in the patient's joints. In addition, and as is also the case with acupuncture, physical therapy can encourage the body to produce more of its own natural pain-relieving chemicals, which leads to significant pain relief.

"Pain in the neck and low back are the most common conditions we see in the baby boomer generation," explained Jessica Heath of the Drayer Physical Therapy Institute, which is based in Hummelstown. She also added that many patients come in for help dealing with arthritic joint pain and pain in the shoulders and knees.

There are a wide variety of treatment techniques physical therapists will use, depending on the patient's specific condition and symptoms.

Aquatic therapy, which refers to treatments and exercises performed in water, is often prescribed for patients when their pain levels are significantly restricting their ability to move.

"The depth of the water changes buoyancy in patients," explained

“Acupuncture, physical therapy, or a combination of the two could bring you the pain relief you’ve been searching for.”

Heath. "If you're in a lot of pain, being in water can unload the weight on your body, which allows you to move more freely."

Gait retraining is another type of physical therapy that is often used for pain management, particularly in patients who are struggling to stand or walk due to issues such as stroke, a joint injury, or knee-replacement surgery. With this technique, the physical therapist will assist with a variety of standing and walking exercises to help strengthen the muscles and joints and improve balance.

"The way you walk can change while you're in pain," Heath said. "As

your pain resolves, we're looking at what happens to your gait to help prevent re-injury."

Some physical therapists adhere to the McKenzie Method, an approach that determines the relationship between the pain a patient feels and the positions or postures that patient assumes while sitting, standing, or moving. The goal is to develop an exercise protocol patients can complete on their own so they can treat and manage their pain themselves.

Heath emphasized that your physical therapist will determine the best treatment techniques for you by first establishing the source of your pain.

"At the first appointment, we spend a good 45 minutes talking to the patient about the pain and doing an evaluation of strength, flexibility, and range of motion. This helps us identify the source of the pain."

For baby boomers who want to avoid or reduce their reliance on pain medication, there are many treatment options available. Acupuncture, physical therapy, or a combination of the two could bring you the pain relief you've been searching for.)))

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