

# Acupuncture as a tool to reduce nausea in terminally ill patients

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**Background/aims:** The terminally ill patient is suffering from many different symptoms. In total 70 % are suffering from nausea and vomiting due to the wide spread of cancer or due to side effects of the treatment. Often the antiemetics are not able to reduce the symptoms to a level to allow the patient to experience quality in life in the last days of life. We had some clinical experience with acupuncture as a potential complementary therapy. However we wanted to systematically investigate if acupuncture reduces nausea and vomiting in the terminally ill patients

**Methods:** A comparative effectiveness research design was used to generate evidence based knowledge close to practice for the use of clinicians. The sample size was calculated to 136 patients randomized into an intervention group and a control group, respectively. The intervention group received acupuncture in addition to usual care for three days. We used the acupuncture spots: PC-6, ST-36, LR-3 and Yin Tang. The control group received usual care only. Nausea was measured before, during and after the three days of inclusion using EORTC QLQ-c-15-PAL and vomiting was measured before and after.

## Reduction of nausea score

Yes 39 (75%)		The intervention group (n=52)	No 13 (25%)
Yes 33 (55%)		The control group (n=60)	No 27 (45%)

Chi-squared test p-value: 0.028

**Results:** In total, 136 patients were randomized, 24 patients withdrew resulting in a total sample of 112 patients: 52 patients in the intervention group and 60 patients in the control group.

In the intervention group 75% of the patients experienced a reduction of their nausea score after the intervention compared to 55 % in the control group. (p=0.028)

52% of the patients in the intervention group did not experienced nausea at all after the intervention compare to 30% in the control group.

31% of the patients in the intervention group were still vomiting after the intervention compare to 34% in the control group. No statistical significant difference was found.

Patients in the control group had a statistically significant increase of p=0.019 in their dose of antiemetics compared with the intervention group.

**Discussion:** Blinding is difficult in acupuncture research as an interaction between the patient and the acupuncturist is required. In the present study the placebo effect was embedded in the treatment ritual and interacted with the active effect of the acupuncture; together they created the overall treatment effect.

**Conclusions:** Acupuncture reduced the experience of nausea among terminally ill patients but did not reduce vomiting. Thus, acupuncture is recommended to reduce nausea among terminally ill patients.

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