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Acupuncture treatments after mastectomy help women cope with post-operative symptoms

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Women who had acupuncture treatments after breast cancer surgery at Abbott Northwestern Hospital had a greater reduction in pain, nausea, and anxiety and were better able to cope on the first post-operative day compared with patients who had traditional care, according to a study published in the Oncology Nursing Forum in November.

"We are always looking for non-pharmacologic pain management options. This study showed that acupuncture in the hospital after mastectomy is not only feasible, it also appears to decrease patients' symptoms of pain, nausea, and anxiety," said Sue Sendelbach, RN, PhD, director of Nursing Research at Abbott Northwestern.

Researchers chose the study variables -- pain, nausea, anxiety and ability to cope - based on an Oncology Nursing Society survey in which members were asked to report the symptoms that are the most distressing and difficult to manage.

Abbott Northwestern study patients entered their levels -- on a zero to ten scale -- of pain, nausea, anxiety, and ability to cope into a tablet computer immediately before and after receiving acupuncture. Acupuncture was delivered as many as two times after surgery at least 12 hours apart. Patients in the usual care group were seen two times after surgery at least 12 hours apart to collect the same variables.

"The results of this study demonstrate that acupuncture reduced patients' perception of pain, anxiety and nausea by about 1.5 units, which is both clinically and statistically significant. For comparison, it is known that opioid medications reduce patients' perception of pain by 1.9 units, which is comparable to the decrease for acupuncture in this study," said Jeffery A. Dusek, PhD, director of Research for the Penny George™ Institute for Health and Healing.

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