

With no specific treatment like methadone for opiate addiction, researchers have cast around for ways to treat cocaine dependence. So far no drug has convincingly fit the bill. Acupuncture is a popular alternative, but a new synthesis of the research has questioned its efficacy. ❶ A team including researchers from the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine identified nine studies which randomly allocated cocaine dependent patients either to a recommended acupuncture procedure or to comparison treatments. In all but one, the comparison used was 'sham' acupuncture during which needles are inserted at supposedly inactive sites. Seven used biochemical tests to confirm cocaine abstinence at follow-up. When their results were pooled, there was no evidence that acupuncture helped patients stop using cocaine. This verdict statistically confirms previous expert reviews, but 'no evidence' does not mean acupuncture has been proved to have no value. On average half the subjects who started the trials could not be followed up, weakening their ability to detect any effect. Neither could the studies test whether offering acupuncture attracts people to services, a potential benefit even if it does not augment subsequent treatment. And for practitioners, perhaps the most important issue is not whether 'real' acupuncture is better than sham, but whether offering acupuncture as a supplement to normal treatment improves outcomes. As the research stands there is no basis for acupuncture as a primary treatment for cocaine addiction but it may aid retention in the primary treatment and, offered as an option, might attract some patients to treatment who would otherwise not attend.

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❶ Mills E.J. *et al.* "Efficacy of acupuncture for cocaine dependence: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *Harm Reduction Journal*. 2005, 2(4). Copies: www.harmreductionjournal.com/content/2/1/4.