

# Acupuncture as pain relief in labour

## Information leaflet



Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust's maternity units offer acupuncture as an option for pain relief in labour, alongside more conventional methods including injectable pain killers (opioids such as pethidine), gas and air (Entonox) and epidural.

Acupuncture is provided by registered midwives who have undergone a highly specialised training programme, which has been endorsed by the British Medical Acupuncture Society.

### What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a treatment that involves inserting fine needles into the body. It is believed to have originated in China around 2000 years ago and remains an important part of the system of traditional Chinese medicine. Since the 1970s, acupuncture has been increasingly accepted within Western medicine and is widely used by midwives in other European countries, including Germany, and Scandinavian countries.

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## Can acupuncture reduce labour pain?

Acupuncture for pain in labour has been shown to:

- Reduce labour pain intensity
- Reduce the use of pharmacological analgesia including epidural
- Shorten labour
- Reduce need for forceps or ventouse

Whilst more research is still needed, this level of evidence is comparable to that supporting immersion in water, relaxation techniques, massage and the use of non-opioid drugs.

## How does acupuncture reduce labour pain?

Acupuncture is widely recognised for its pain-killing abilities and is currently recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) for the treatment of low back pain and headaches. Studies have shown that acupuncture therapy releases natural pain-killing substances called endorphins into the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It is also able to alter the transmission of pain signals through the nervous system and their eventual processing within the brain.

Acupuncture has also been shown to improve the blood supply to the womb and influence contractions. It can induce relaxation and reduce stress/anxiety, which may also help you cope with labour pains.

## Is acupuncture treatment safe?

Acupuncture is generally very safe. Serious side effects are very rare (approximately one in every 200,000 treatments). There is no evidence that acupuncture treatment is harmful during pregnancy and childbirth. There are some relatively common but minor side effects including: fainting, dizziness, drowsiness and mild bleeding or bruising at the needling site.

## What are the potential benefits of acupuncture?

Apart from the minor side effects listed above, acupuncture is

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drug free and not associated with the adverse effects of pharmacological methods such as Entonox, opiates or epidural, which may include nausea and vomiting, drowsiness or respiratory depression in the baby, and an increased risk of requiring an assisted delivery (ventouse or forceps).

### **What does the acupuncture treatment involve?**

Sterile, disposable, single-use needles will be inserted at a number of points on the body, usually the limbs. Sometimes a slight sharp sensation is felt as the needle passes through the skin, although the needles are so fine that you may barely feel anything at all. If there is any ongoing pain, this may indicate that the needle tip is close to or touching a nerve, in which case it can be moved or withdrawn immediately. Please note that this only occurs in around 1% of treatments. The needles will remain in place for 30 to 40 minutes, and then will usually be removed.

The treatment will usually be repeated every two hours, but can be repeated sooner or even given continuously if you feel it is necessary to achieve adequate pain relief.

### **Are there any contraindications?**

There are no absolute contraindications to acupuncture treatment; however, please inform your practitioner if any of the following apply to you:


- You have experienced a fit, faint or 'funny turn'
  - You have a cardiac pacemaker or other electrical implant
  - You are taking anti-coagulant drugs such as warfarin
  - You have a bleeding disorder like haemophilia
  - You are known to have damaged heart valves
  - You are at a particularly high risk of infection.
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## Further information and advice can be obtained from

**NHS 111**

**NHS Choices online**

 **111**

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### Contact details


If you have any questions or concerns please call us:


#### **Tunbridge Wells Hospital (Pembury)**

Maternity Day Assessment

 **01892 633041**



#### **Maidstone Birth Centre**

 **01622 220160**

 **01622 220161**

**MTW NHS Trust is committed to making its patient information accessible in a range of languages and formats. If you need this leaflet in another language or format please ask one of your clinical care team or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). We will do our best to arrange this.**

Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

**Telephone:**  01622 224960 or  01892 632953

**Email:** [mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net](mailto:mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net)

**or visit their office** at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: [www.mtw.nhs.uk](http://www.mtw.nhs.uk) or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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