

Acupuncture and Atrial Fibrillation: Can Traditional Chinese Medicine Improve Recovery Rates for Patients with Arrhythmias?

A recent meta-analysis indicates that acupuncture-assisted treatment of atrial fibrillation offers better outcomes with no apparent adverse reactions

Irregular heart rhythms, known as arrhythmias, can have serious implications for cardiovascular health. Among the most common is atrial fibrillation (AF), a condition where the upper chambers of the heart (atria) beat erratically and at excessively high rates. This chaotic rhythm forces the lower chambers (ventricles) to race as well, disrupting the heart's ability to pump blood effectively. Left untreated, AF significantly increases the risk of severe complications such as ischemic stroke.

Alarmingly, the global incidence of AF has been rising in recent years, highlighting the need for effective and accessible treatments. Conventional approaches include antiarrhythmic drugs and catheter ablation, an invasive procedure. However, both have limitations in their effectiveness and long-term outcomes.

Traditional Chinese medicine offers a complementary approach, with acupuncture being widely practiced for preventing and treating arrhythmias. While numerous studies have explored the potential of acupuncture in managing AF, there has been no comprehensive analysis to establish its efficacy. Addressing this gap, a team of doctors in China conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials, offering new insights into the role of acupuncture in AF management.

For their review, which was published in [Medicine](#) in November 2024, the research team performed a search on eight databases for randomized controlled trials on the acupuncture assisted treatment of AF that were conducted between January 2000 and November 2023. They then carried out data extraction and quality evaluation of the studies based on rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria. *“One of the advantages of our study is the rigorosity of our inclusion criteria, and that we included only randomized*

clinical trials,” says the corresponding author of the study, Dr. Hongju Jiang of the Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medicine and The Second Affiliated Hospital of Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The research team included a total of 15 research studies, involving 1960 patients, in their analysis. Their meta-analysis showed that acupuncture therapy could increase cardioversion—the conversion of an irregular heart rhythm to a normal one—in patients with AF. They also found that acupuncture in combination with conventional therapies was more effective in reducing the ventricular rate in patients with AF as compared to conventional therapies alone. Patients with AF who were treated with acupuncture along with conventional therapies also showed shorter cardioversion times than patients treated with traditional therapies alone. The meta-analysis also revealed that acupuncture along with conventional drug treatment was more clinically effective than treatment with only drugs. No severe adverse reactions, such as hemorrhage, hematoma, and local infection, were reported by the study either. *“Overall, these findings suggest that acupuncture can be an effective adjuvant therapy for people with AF,”* says Dr. Jiang. *“For patients who are allergic or resistant to antiarrhythmic drugs, acupuncture can moreover be used as an alternative therapy.”* The study also showed that the recurrence rate of AF was lower after treatment with acupuncture.

It is worthwhile noting that the generalizability of these results is impacted by the limited number of studies on the subject. *“Further rigorous, long-term, large-scale, multicenter double-blind randomized controlled trials will be critical to validate the effectiveness of acupuncture in the treatment of AF,”* concludes Dr. Jiang.

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Authors: Liu, Yuqing PhD; Pang, Xuemeng PhD; Wang, Yajuan MD; Liu, Xu PhD; Jiang, Hongju PhD

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