

Acupuncture Reduces Depressive Symptoms During Pregnancy With Few Adverse Effects

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February 25, 2010 — Targeted acupuncture may offer women with major depression a safe and effective alternative to antidepressant medication, new research suggests.

Investigators at Stanford University School of Medicine in California found that women with major depressive disorder treated with depression-specific acupuncture had a 63% response rate after 12 sessions compared with a 44.3% response rate in 2 combined control groups who were treated with either acupuncture not known to help alleviate depressive symptoms or Swedish massage.

"Pregnancy just by its nature can bring out some underlying psychiatric and emotional issues ... but treatment of depression during pregnancy is critically important so that a woman can maintain her sense of well being and take good care of herself, her fetus and, someday, her child," study coauthor Deirdre Lyell, MD, Stanford University School of Medicine, said in a statement.

Led by Rachel Manber, PhD, the study was published in the March issue of *Obstetrics & Gynecology*.

Response Rates Significantly Higher

For the study, investigators randomized 150 women whose pregnancies were between 12 and 30 weeks of gestation and who met *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fourth Edition) criteria for major depressive disorder and who scored at least 14 on the 17-item Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression.

Of the 141 women who eventually entered the study, 52 received depression-specific acupuncture, 49 received control acupuncture, and 49 others received Swedish massage.

Treatments were provided twice a week for the first 4 weeks and then weekly thereafter for 4 additional weeks, with each session lasting about 25 minutes.

The investigators found that response rates were significantly higher in women who received depression-specific acupuncture than for either control group. Response rates in women randomized to the 2 control interventions did not differ significantly from each other at 37.5% for the control acupuncture group vs 50% for the massage group.

On the other hand, remission rates did not differ significantly between women who received depression-specific acupuncture at 34.8% and the combined control groups at 29.5%. They also did not differ between those assigned to the control acupuncture group at 27.5% or the massage group at 31.2%.

Thirty-three of the study participants discontinued treatment before the study endpoint, 30% of them for reasons related to the pregnancy. Some women in both acupuncture groups reported

transient discomfort at the point of needle insertion, and 1 woman experienced bleeding at the needle site.

Significantly fewer women who received massage reported any adverse effects compared with the 2 acupuncture groups.

Clinically Meaningful

The study authors point out that the benefits observed with depression-specific acupuncture can be considered "clinically meaningful" when assessed in a broader context of depression studies.

Although there are no randomized controlled trials of antidepressants being used during pregnancy, 1 randomized controlled trial found that interpersonal psychotherapy produced a 52% reduction in Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression scores and a 19% remission rate after 16 weeks of therapy, to which the currently study compares very favorably.

According to the study, antidepressant use during pregnancy doubled between 1999 and 2003, but many women are reluctant to take these medications because of safety concerns. In fact, in this particular study, 94% of the women involved expressed reluctance to take an antidepressant because of their pregnancy.

"Because there's this concern about medication among pregnant women and their physicians, it's important to find an alternative," said Dr. Manber.

Results from this study therefore suggest that this standardized acupuncture protocol could be considered a "viable treatment option" for depression during pregnancy, the investigators conclude.

Michael Thase, MD, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, cautions that findings from this study are preliminary, although they suggest that depression-specific acupuncture may have value in major depressive disorder in this patient population.

On the other hand, another study assessing depression-specific acupuncture in a broader population of men and women with major depressive disorder failed to find a significant effect from the modality, so evidence supporting acupuncture for the treatment of major depressive disorder is not consistent.

"Still there is reason to be cautious when prescribing antidepressants in pregnancy, and one has to weigh the pros and cons of using an antidepressant on an individual basis," he told *Medscape Psychiatry*.

"If these promising findings are confirmed, it would be good to have another option to complement the focused forms of psychotherapy which are currently used for antenatal depression," he added.

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