**Introduction**

Acupuncture is the practice of inserting thin needles into specific body points to improve health and well-being. It originated in China more than 2,000 years ago.

Research has shown that acupuncture reduces nausea and vomiting after surgery and chemotherapy. It can also relieve pain. But researchers don't fully understand how acupuncture works.

This reference summary will help you understand acupuncture. It discusses the benefits, the risks and what to expect before, during and after acupuncture treatment.

**What is Acupuncture?**

The term “acupuncture” describes a family of procedures involving the stimulation of points on the body using a variety of techniques. Acupuncture applies needles, heat, pressure and other treatments to one or more places on the skin known as acupuncture points. In traditional Chinese medicine theory, this regulates the flow of vital energy, known as qi, along pathways known as meridians.

Acupuncture is one of the key components of traditional Chinese medicine. It has been practiced in China and other Asian countries for thousands of years. Acupuncture is among the oldest healing practices in the world.

Acupuncture is considered part of complementary and alternative medicine. Complementary and alternative medicine are medical and health care systems, practices and products that are not presently considered to be a part of conventional medicine. Complementary medicine is used together with conventional medicine, and alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine.
Acupuncture is used to treat many illnesses and ailments. But it is mainly used to control pain and to help control nausea and vomiting. Researchers don't fully understand how acupuncture works. It might aid the activity of your body's pain-killing chemicals. It also might affect how you release chemicals that regulate blood pressure and flow.

It is important that acupuncture treatment be given by a qualified practitioner who uses a new set of disposable, or single-use, needles for each patient. This can help prevent infections and other health risks.

Benefits
People use acupuncture for various types of pain. The most common use of acupuncture is to treat back pain, followed by joint pain, neck pain and headaches. Some people do not feel any benefit after acupuncture treatment. Acupuncture is being studied for its usefulness in easing many kinds of pain. There are promising findings in some conditions, such as chronic low-back pain and osteoarthritis of the knee.

Acupuncture may also be used to treat:
• Dental pain.
• Fibromyalgia.
• Labor pain.
• Menstrual cramps.
• Osteoarthritis.

Fibromyalgia is a common condition that causes pain and fatigue in the muscles, joints, ligaments and tendons. Osteoarthritis is a type of arthritis that results from wear and tear on the joints. It is also called degenerative arthritis.

There are several theories about the way acupuncture affects biomechanisms. For example, acupuncture may activate certain systems in the brain that respond to pain. But additional research is still needed to test the theories.

Acupuncture doesn't lessen pain or other symptoms for everybody. There is evidence that people's attitudes about acupuncture can affect outcomes. Patients that believe acupuncture will help relieve their pain report significantly greater pain relief.
Risks
Relatively few complications from the use of acupuncture have been reported, in light of the millions of people treated each year. Complications have been caused by needles that were not sterilized properly and incorrect treatment delivery. Practitioners should use a new set of disposable needles taken from a sealed package for each patient. Treatment sites should be swabbed with alcohol or another disinfectant before inserting needles.

When not delivered properly, acupuncture can cause serious health problems, including infections and punctured organs. To reduce the risks of acupuncture, make sure to choose a reliable practitioner. Check the practitioner’s training and ask for recommendations from people you trust.

Before Acupuncture
Acupuncture may be performed differently depending on the health care provider. Each has a unique style. Most practitioners blend aspects of Eastern and Western approaches to medicine.

To help you decide the type of acupuncture treatment that will help the most, your health care provider will ask you questions about your symptoms, behaviors and lifestyle. This evaluation may take up to 60 minutes. Later appointments often take a half-hour or less. Commonly, 6 to 12 treatments are needed to address a single complaint. These treatments are scheduled over a few months.

You should ask the practitioner about the estimated number of treatments needed and how much each treatment will cost. Some insurance companies may cover the costs of acupuncture, while others may not. It is important to check with your insurer before you start treatment to see whether acupuncture is covered for your condition and, if so, to what extent.

During Acupuncture
Acupuncture points are located in all areas of the body. Not all points will be close to the area of your pain. The health care provider performing the acupuncture will tell you which areas he or she will use during the treatment and if articles of clothing need to be removed. If needed, you may be offered a gown, towel or sheet to make you feel more comfortable.
Just prior to the treatment, you will lie down on a padded table. This gives the acupuncturist access to the appropriate points and may help you relax.

Acupuncture needles are metallic, solid and hair-thin. People experience acupuncture differently, but most feel no pain or minimal pain as the needles are inserted. After they have been placed, the acupuncturist may gently move or twirl the needles. Sometimes heat or mild electrical pulses are applied to the needles. The needles often remain in place for 10 to 20 minutes. During this time you must lie still. After 10 to 20 minutes, the needles will be removed. This rarely causes feelings of discomfort or pain.

**After Acupuncture**

Some people feel energized by treatment, while others feel relaxed. Improper needle placement, movement of the patient or a defect in the needle can cause soreness and pain during treatment. This is why it is important to seek treatment from a qualified acupuncture practitioner.

Usually several treatments are needed. If so, you will need to schedule your next appointment. Some treatments require a specific amount of time to pass before the next treatment takes place. Treatment may take place over a period of several weeks or more.

Some people do not respond to acupuncture. If symptoms don't improve within a few weeks, acupuncture may not be the right treatment for you. You can discuss this with your regular health care provider or the acupuncturist.

Be sure to tell all of your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. This will give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health.

**Summary**

Acupuncture has been practiced in China and other Asian countries for thousands of years. Scientists are studying the usefulness of acupuncture for a wide range of conditions. Acupuncture is used to treat many illnesses and ailments. But it is mainly used to control pain, nausea and vomiting.
Very few complications have been reported from the use of acupuncture. However, acupuncture can cause potentially serious side effects if not delivered properly. It is important that acupuncture treatment be given by a qualified practitioner who uses a new set of disposable, single-use needles for each patient.

Because acupuncture has very few side effects, it may be a good option if you are having trouble controlling pain, nausea or vomiting with more conventional treatments.