

## Acupuncture makes eating easier after cancer treatment

Susan Keir loves dark chocolate. But a year ago, she couldn't eat a piece without the need to wash it down with water; the chocolate tasted awful and was hard to swallow.

Radiation therapy for throat cancer in 2005 left the 57-year-old grappling with a dry mouth, damaged taste buds, and difficulty swallowing.

Then she met Weidong Lu, MPH, a licensed senior acupuncturist at Dana-Farber's [Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies](/pat/support/zakim/default.html) (</pat/support/zakim/default.html>). Keir can now enjoy her favorite Kit-Kat bars again, thanks to acupuncture.

A year of treatment with this Chinese practice, involving pinpricks with hair-thin needles to specific points on her face, neck, shoulders, hands and legs, has eased Keir's problems related to insufficient saliva and inability to move food around in her mouth.

"I can now eat things like pasta sauce and tomato ketchup, which I couldn't bear to put in my mouth before my acupuncture treatment," she says.

After more than 2,500 years of use worldwide for a variety of health conditions, this treatment received a boost as a legitimate form of integrative (or complementary) therapy for cancer patients after the National Institutes of Health (NIH) issued a consensus statement in 1997 endorsing acupuncture's effectiveness in treating chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting.

The statement came close on the heels of a series of clinical trials providing evidence for the beneficial effects of acupuncture instead of pharmaceuticals alone.

More recent validation came when Lu received a Career Development Award from the NIH to focus on the benefits of acupuncture on head and neck cancer patients dealing with dysphagia (pain and difficulty swallowing). He is the first integrative therapy practitioner to receive this prestigious five-year grant.

On staff with the Zakim Center since 2000, Lu was once the sole practitioner here providing this specialty. Today he leads a team of five expert acupuncturists who offer weekly therapy sessions to hundreds of patients each year.

"Acupuncture treats symptoms, not the disease," says David Rosenthal, MD, co-medical director of the Zakim Center.

The technique has proven useful to control pain arising from damage to peripheral nerves and improve quality of life. Postoperative pain in patients with breast, bladder, prostate, or ovarian cancer has been effectively quelled by acupuncture.

In these instances, it is combined with traditional pain management strategies, but Lu says acupuncture can also lessen the need for painkillers and their undesirable side effects.

Some of the strongest evidence for acupuncture's value in cancer symptom management comes from studies of "cottonmouth" in patients like Keir, who have undergone radiation therapy. Dryness of the mouth due to insufficient saliva can hamper eating and speaking, as well as foster bad breath and infections.

In one study, acupuncture in a six-week period dramatically increased salivation in cancer patients who were monitored for six months after their last acupuncture session. Functional brain scans of these patients pinpointed the mechanism: Stimulating a specific acupuncture point at the base of the index finger activated the brain area responsible for salivation.

Acupuncture has also shown promise in treating insomnia and respiratory problems in some cancer patients, as well as in reducing depression and anxiety. The scientific evidence, however, is still too scant to garner health insurers' routine support of acupuncture, Lu says.

The inherent difficulties in conducting trials, the dearth of research dollars, and doubt in some circles about complementary therapies in general have slowed its acceptance. A big step toward furthering its legitimacy at Dana-Farber and elsewhere will be more research grants.

"Dana-Farber is the national leader in ushering acupuncture into the arena of cancer treatment," says Lu. "Other major comprehensive cancer centers followed suit, and federal and private funding started to trickle in. Slowly, the technique is gaining prominence as we cut through the lingering skepticism."

— Prashant Nair



Weidong Lu, MPH, uses acupuncture to help patients manage the symptoms of cancer treatment.

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## Video: Acupuncture



Hear Susan and Lu talk about acupuncture for cancer treatment side-effects.

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