

Acupuncture for Temporomandibular Disorder: Myth or Reality?

Temporomandibular disorders (TMD) are a prevalent condition affecting more than a quarter of the global population. Characterized by pain and dysfunction in the jaw joint and surrounding muscles, TMD can lead to intense, debilitating discomfort. In many cases, it is linked to other conditions, including depression, sleep disorders, anxiety, and fibromyalgia, making management even more challenging.

Beyond pain, TMD symptoms include clicking or popping sounds in the jaw joint, limited mouth movement, jaw stiffness, and discomfort while chewing, speaking, or yawning. Less obvious symptoms, such as earaches, dizziness, ringing in the ears, and neck or shoulder pain, can also be present.

Current treatment approaches

Conventional TMD treatment focuses on pain relief and restoring jaw function. Dentists, doctors, and other healthcare professionals commonly prescribe medications (e.g., anticonvulsants, antidepressants, anti-inflammatory drugs, and pain relievers), as well as non-pharmacological interventions like oral appliances, physiotherapy, and patient education. In severe cases, surgery may be considered. Yet, despite this range of treatments, managing TMD effectively remains a challenge.

Can acupuncture help? A recent study says yes.

A recent study published in *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* investigated the effects of acupuncture as a complementary treatment for TMD. Sixty patients with a minimum three-month history of pain-related TMD participated in the study, divided into two groups:

- Acupuncture Group: Received real acupuncture.
- Control Group: Received sham acupuncture (blunt needles without penetration).

All patients attended three sessions per week for four weeks. Researchers evaluated pain levels, jaw function, depression, anxiety, stress, and sleep quality before the treatment, then reevaluated them at four and eight weeks.

The results

The study found that 86.7% of patients in the acupuncture group experienced reduced pain, compared to 43.3% in the control group. Patients in the acupuncture group also reported:

- Improved jaw movement, with no pain while opening or moving the mouth.

- Reduced depression, anxiety, and stress scores.
- Better sleep quality.
- Sustained benefits 4 weeks after treatment ended.

In addition, 96.7% of patients who received acupuncture were satisfied with their results. Importantly, acupuncture did not cause any serious adverse effects, making it a promising option for those seeking alternative pain relief.

A light at the end of the tunnel

For those who have battled the daily struggles of TMD, this study brings a light at the end of the tunnel. While further research is needed to explore its effects in combination with conventional pain treatments, these findings suggest that acupuncture might just bring back the brightness of life lost to chronic pain.

References

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