

Acupuncture instead of codeine for tonsillectomy pain in children.

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Abstract

OBJECTIVES:

Severe throat pain can result from tonsillectomy and last up to 10 days in children. Codeine elixir has long been used for pain relief, but has recently been banned by the Food and Drug Administration due to a recently recognized risk of death. We explored acupuncture as an alternative means of pain relief for children and adolescents after tonsillectomy.

METHODS:

This was a retrospective review of children and adolescents who underwent tonsillectomy over a three-month period. No narcotics were prescribed after surgery. Patients who wanted help with pain relief were offered acupuncture. Perceived pain level was assessed before and after the acupuncture treatment. Following the 10-day recovery for tonsillectomy, patients or their parents were queried as to how long the pain relief from acupuncture intervention was perceived to last.

RESULTS:

56 children and adolescents underwent tonsillectomy in the three-month window selected for the retrospective review. 31 of these patients (ranging from 2 to 17 years in age) received an acupuncture intervention for postoperative pain. The mean reported pain level before acupuncture was 5.52 (SD=2.28) out of 10. This fell to 1.92 (SD=2.43) after acupuncture. Statistical analysis supported the general conclusion that pain reports decline after acupuncture in the sampled population. However, the limitations of the methodology and the sample suggest that this generalization should be treated as preliminary. 17 patients or their parents provided a post-recovery report for how long they believed the acupuncture intervention lasted. The mean duration of perceived acupuncture benefit was 61.24h, though the standard deviation was large (64.58h) with about 30% of patients reporting less than three hours of benefit and about 30% reporting more than 60h. No adverse effects were observed as a result of acupuncture treatments.

CONCLUSIONS:

The data tentatively suggest that acupuncture decreases perceived pain in children and adolescents after tonsillectomy. These data - combined with the cost effectiveness, safety and ease of administering acupuncture - suggest that further studies exploring the effectiveness of acupuncture in juveniles after tonsillectomy are merited.

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