

Acupressure May Ease Agitation in Patients With Dementia

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Agitation is one of the most challenging symptoms in patients with dementia. They might yell or attack other people, and are at risk of injuring themselves or others. Other such patients might wander, be unable to feed themselves, or undress themselves in public. This can lead to malnutrition, dehydration and lack of sleep, as well as fatigue and frustration on the part of caregivers.

A small study published in the February 2007 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* has shown some promising benefit for acupressure to control agitation in dementia.¹ Li-Chan Lin, PhD, and colleagues at the National Yang-Ming University in Taipei, Taiwan, tested acupressure techniques on 31 patients with dementia. Baseline data were collected during the first week of the study, and for four weeks, the patients received 15-minute acupressure sessions twice a day, five days a week. After one week with no treatment, patients then received a comparison treatment consisting of four weeks of "companionship and conversation." Twenty patients completed the study.

The researchers found, overall, that the acupressure therapy showed a significant reduction in verbal and physical attacks, compared to the "companionship and conversation" treatment. Additionally, the acupressure therapy showed an immediate improvement in patient behavior and appeared to prevent aggressive symptoms from occurring in the first place.

In a statement to the press, Lin suggested that due to the similarities between acupressure and massage therapy, this sort of treatment might become more readily accepted by Western medicine.

Additionally, a recent review article of research on massage and touch therapy for patients with dementia examined 34 articles in which massage or touch therapy was compared to other forms of treatment or no treatment.² The study appeared to indicate that for patients who have lost the ability to properly communicate verbally, physical touch might perhaps be the only way for them to connect with other people. Hand massage and touch, plus verbal encouragement, were suggested as methods for immediate or short-term reduction of agitation.

The researchers stated in their conclusion, "Massage and touch may serve as alternatives or complements to other therapies for the management of behavioural, emotional and perhaps other conditions associated with dementia."²

Despite the small size of the Lin, et al., study, this could lead to more research on the benefits of acupressure and touch therapy for patients with dementia. Such research ultimately could benefit both patients and caregivers.

References

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- behaviour in dementia: a pilot study. *J Clin Nurs*. Feb. 2007;16(2):308-15.
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