

Acupuncture

Advice online | 26 February 2019

Note: This advice is given by the CAP Executive about non-broadcast advertising. It does not constitute legal advice. It does not bind CAP, CAP advisory panels or the Advertising Standards Authority.

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the insertion of needles into the skin and underlying tissues in key 'points' for therapeutic or preventative purposes. The theory behind the therapy is that certain "trigger points" – probably nerve fibres or receptors – are stimulated with needles which are thought to induce rhythmic discharges that cause a release of endogenous opioids and oxytocin.

What treatment claims are likely to be a problem?

The ASA is likely to expect all claims of efficacy to be supported by robust evidence in the form of clinically controlled trials.

In 2013 the ASA investigated a complaint about two leaflets which made efficacy claims for Traditional Chinese Acupuncture and Group Acupuncture. It stated "Some of the conditions we treat include: - Women's health, including disturbances of the menstrual cycle, gynaecological disorders - Men's health, including prostatitis, urinary disorders, fertility - Emotional issues, stress, anxiety, depression, addictions - Headaches, migraines, tinnitus, dizziness, vertigo - Sleep disturbances - Immune system imbalances, allergies, Herpes zoster (Shingles) - Gastro-intestinal conditions - Musculoskeletal problems including joint pain, back pain - Upper respiratory disorders e.g. sinusitis, asthma - Hypertension (High blood pressure)".

Although the evidence demonstrated that acupuncture could be effective in the relief of pain associated with some instances, the ASA considered that in relation to the reference to some conditions, the claims in the ad went further than the evidence supported and therefore concluded that the ad was misleading (University College London Hospitals t/a The Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine, 12 June 2013).

In 2017, the ASA considered evidence in relation to a number of claims including those which stated that acupuncture could help with fertility support, musculoskeletal problems, headaches, migraines, insomnia and anxiety. Although the advertiser submitted a large amount of evidence, the ASA considered that it was not sufficiently robust to the support those treatment claims.

Marketers occasionally claim that acupuncture can help delay or prevent ageing. To date, neither CAP nor the ASA has seen evidence that acupuncture can slow down, reverse or relieve the superficial signs of ageing or heal scarring. Marketers should not make claims relating to the improvement of the appearance of skin conditions.

Neither CAP nor the ASA has been provided with evidence to demonstrate that hand-held acupuncture and acupressure devices are effective in treating conditions commonly treated

with traditional acupuncture. Marketers are reminded to hold robust evidence for any treatment claims (SCD Ltd, 17 April 2013; Alliance International Ltd, 28 January 2009).

What treatment claims are likely to be acceptable?

The ASA has been provided with clinical evidence and has ruled that the following claims are likely to be acceptable ([University College London Hospitals](#), 12 June 2013).

- Short-term improvement in the symptoms of overactive bladder syndrome (through electro-acupuncture at the SP6 point)
- Short-term relief of tension type headaches
- Short-term relief of migraine headache
- Short-term relief of chronic low back pain
- Short-term relief of neck pain or chronic neck pain
- Short-term relief from temporomandibular (TMD/TMJ) pain
- Temporary adjunctive treatment for osteoarthritis knee pain

However, the ASA has equally upheld complaints about ads that refer to the above conditions but where it was not made clear that any relief achieved was temporary or “short-term”.

The ASA is likely to accept advertising claims about the sensory effects of acupuncture including claims about well-being or references to “feeling revitalised”, “more positive” or “relaxed”.

Can practitioners of acupuncture claim to treat conditions that should be treated under the supervision of a qualified health professional?

CAP understands that no compulsory regulation exists for acupuncture practitioners and the ASA is yet to consider whether, for those practitioners who are registered with an appropriately accredited body, they are likely to be considered to be suitably qualified for the purposes of the Code (Rule 12.2)

Where practitioners are registered with a body that has appropriate accreditation in place, such as that provided by the Professional Standards Authority Voluntary Register Scheme, it is possible that the ASA may consider such credentials to be appropriate evidence of suitable qualification.

CAP otherwise advises that marketers should not claim to treat (or discourage essential medical treatment for) any conditions for which medical supervision should be sought ([CMT Integrated Health Ltd](#), 22 May 2013).

Ring on [020 7492 2100](tel:02074922100), between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday for general advice about the CAP Code if you have any questions, or [send your specific queries](#), to the CAP Copy Advice Team.

April 2021