

Acupuncture in the ICU – A Natural Approach to Faster Recovery

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › A mini-review published in *Frontiers in Neurology* suggests that acupuncture may assist ICU patients in recovering more quickly by relieving pain, lowering sedative use, shortening ventilator dependency, enhancing strength, and increasing days free from delirium
- › Acupuncture may help calm inflammation, boost immunity, and improve blood flow in sepsis patients, offering supportive benefits alongside standard ICU treatment
- › It's not just for managing one symptom: Acupuncture could act as a whole-body support tool in the ICU, easing pain, stress, and sleep issues while reducing drug side effects and helping the body recover
- › Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) is a needle-free method using fingertip tapping on acupuncture points that offers a gentler alternative for patients wary of traditional acupuncture
- › Other nondrug therapies such as massage, music therapy, and mindfulness contribute to ICU recovery by alleviating anxiety, decreasing pain, and enhancing sleep quality

Every year, more than 5 million Americans are admitted to intensive care units (ICUs) to get life-saving treatment. Thanks to modern technology, survival rates have never been higher – however, recovery is often brutal. Up to 80% of ventilated patients experience

delirium,¹ and nearly half develop severe muscle weakness that can linger for months. These complications stretch hospital stays and drive costs, with ICU care expenditures averaging over \$4,000 per day.²

Heavy reliance on sedatives and opioids adds another layer of risk. Ironically, the very drugs meant to ease suffering can slow recovery, extend time on mechanical ventilation, and leave patients mentally foggy for weeks after discharge.³ In response to these concerns, researchers are exploring gentler, complementary approaches to support healing — including acupuncture, a therapy rooted in ancient tradition.

A Legacy of Helping People Feel Less Pain

Acupuncture has been practiced for over 2,500 years in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and is based on the concept of 'Qi' (pronounced 'chee') — energy that flows through the body via pathways called meridians. The procedure involves inserting hair-thin, sterile needles into specific points on the body.⁴

These needles activate nerve pathways that run to the brain and spinal cord, triggering the release of your body's natural painkillers. Acupuncture also signals the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, the master control centers for hormones and immune function.⁵

Understanding how acupuncture works is important if you're curious about its role in critical care. You're about to learn why this ancient therapy is gaining attention as a supportive option for ICU patients.

Acupuncture Could Hold the Key to a Speedy Recovery

A mini-review published in *Frontiers in Neurology*⁶ examined whether acupuncture can help ill patients recover more quickly in ICUs. The authors reviewed randomized controlled trials, systematic reviews, and mechanistic studies to evaluate their strengths and limitations.⁷ They focused on ICU patients who often struggle with persistent pain, delirium, muscle weakness, and digestive problems after prolonged stays.⁸

- **Acupuncture reduces dependence on drugs** – Acupuncture, especially electroacupuncture (EA) and transcutaneous electrical acupoint stimulation (TEAS), is increasingly used in ICU recovery care. According to their findings, these approaches may reduce the need for sedatives and pain medications, help patients come off ventilators sooner, and shorten ICU stays.
- **Muscle weakness improves with acupuncture** – ICU-acquired weakness (ICU-AW), which involves significant muscle loss after extended hospital stays, impacts up to 50% of patients. Trials indicate that combining acupuncture with rehabilitation enhances muscle strength scores and reduces ventilation duration by approximately two days. Some studies also reported increased muscle thickness, suggesting improved recovery prospects.⁹
- **Delirium-free days were reported** – Recent studies suggest acupuncture may help prevent and treat delirium in ICU patients by balancing brain chemicals, calming inflammation, and supporting normal circadian rhythms. Early findings show more delirium-free days and lower delirium rates, though larger studies are still needed.
- **Gut health benefits add another layer** – Acupuncture helps normalize gut function by easing constipation and reducing diarrhea. Studies show it can increase bowel movements, relieve opioid-related constipation, and lower diarrhea rates in patients receiving tube feeding.
- **What do the researchers say?** – The authors stressed that acupuncture should be viewed as an add-on, not a replacement for standard treatments. They also added that:

"Current evidence shows that it can safely and effectively reduce dependence on analgesic and sedative drugs, facilitate ventilator weaning, mitigate ICU-AW, decrease the incidence of delirium, and improve gastrointestinal function.

These benefits position acupuncture as a reproducible, low-risk, and potentially individualized adjunct, particularly valuable when conventional therapies are limited by adverse effects.

Future research should prioritize large multicenter [Randomized Controlled Trials] or RCTs, establish standardized operating procedures and dose – response frameworks, and incorporate real-world data with long-term outcome measures."

To build on these findings, another team of researchers reviewed additional studies to determine how often acupuncture helps ICU patients manage multiple symptoms and even prevent infections.

Acupuncture as a Complement to Shock and Sepsis Care

To determine whether acupuncture's benefits extend beyond limited studies, a team of researchers analyzed 12 clinical trials involving 682 critically ill patients.¹⁰ The systematic review, published in the *Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine* in 2023, focused broadly on ICU care, but also touched on conditions like shock and sepsis, where acupuncture might offer supportive benefits. Here's what the evidence suggests:

- **Animal studies show heart benefits** — In one experiment, stimulating a nerve similar to acupuncture reduced heart strain and improved blood flow. This effect may result from calming the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which controls involuntary functions such as heart rate and blood pressure.
- **Case reports hint at better blood flow** — Stimulating acupoints on the legs and feet may help improve circulation in patients with shock (a life-threatening drop in blood flow). These findings are preliminary and require further research.

- **Acupuncture may fight inflammation in sepsis** – Sepsis is a severe infection that triggers widespread inflammation and organ stress. Studies suggest that acupuncture can lower inflammation, reduce cell damage caused by unstable molecules, and improve blood flow through tiny vessels that keep organs alive.
- **Boosts immune defenses in lab tests** – Electrically stimulating an acupoint below the knee increased immune cells like natural killer (NK) cells and T-cells, which help fight infections and maintain immune balance.
- **Small trials show symptom improvement** – Patients who received acupuncture along with standard care had lower sepsis severity scores and fewer inflammatory markers. Mortality didn't change, but these results are encouraging for future research.

Acupuncture Framed as Whole-System Support in the ICU

A 2024 narrative review in the Eurasian Journal of Anesthesiology & Intensive Care takes a big-picture look at acupuncture in critical care. Their goal was to identify how it not only works for one symptom, but also supports the entire system during severe illness.¹¹ The researchers examined acupuncture as a whole-body support tool, drawing on both traditional acupuncture theory and modern ICU practice. Here's what they found:

- **Acupuncture is designed to restore balance during critical illness** – In the ICU, where multiple systems are under stress simultaneously, acupuncture may help stabilize the body rather than targeting a single symptom.
- **Multiple ICU-related health concerns are addressed at the same time** – The authors grouped acupuncture's potential benefits into eight areas, including pain management, anxiety and stress relief, improving sleep quality, side effect reduction, respiratory problems, treatment of circulatory shock, nutritional support, and functional recovery after critical illness.

- **Mental health and sleep take center stage** – Anxiety and poor sleep weren't treated as secondary issues. They're highlighted as primary targets for acupuncture due to their impact on healing and overall well-being.
- **Reducing side effects from drugs is a major benefit** – By easing symptoms like pain or nausea, acupuncture could help lower medication doses, reducing risks from sedatives and opioids.

Acupuncture Can Help with Multiple Conditions

Providing support for ICU-related problems and alleviating chronic pain are just some of the health advantages associated with acupuncture. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it also shows promise for helping improve the following conditions:¹²

Neurological and pain-related conditions	Internal and digestive disorders	Women's reproductive health	Other conditions
Headaches	Dysentery, acute bacillary	Dysmenorrhea	Allergic rhinitis (including hay fever)
Facial pain (including craniomandibular disorders)	Epigastralgia (peptic ulcer, gastritis, gastrospasm)	Induction of labor	Depression (including depressive neurosis and post-stroke depression)
Neck pain	Biliary colic	Malposition of fetus	Adverse reactions to radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy

Neurological and pain-related conditions	Internal and digestive disorders	Women's reproductive health	Other conditions
Knee and back pain	Renal colic		
Sciatica	Morning sickness		
Stroke	Leukopenia		
Tennis elbow	Hypertension		
Sprain	Hypotension		
Rheumatoid arthritis	Nausea and vomiting		
Pain in dentistry (including dental pain and temporomandibular dysfunction)			
Postoperative pain			

Thinking About Trying Out Acupuncture?

If you're dealing with back pain or other nagging issues, acupuncture might be a natural way to find relief. It's safe, effective, and supported by growing research – but it's not something you can easily try at home. Ideally, acupuncture requires the help of a trained professional and needs to be done in a clean setting, using sterile, single-use needles. Here are tips to keep note of:¹³

- 1. Talk to your doctor first** — Before booking your first session, check in with your primary care doctor. They'll review your health history and make sure acupuncture is safe for your situation, especially if you're pregnant, on blood thinners, or have cancer or a bleeding disorder.
- 2. Look for a licensed expert** — In the U.S., choose someone with the credential LAc, short for licensed acupuncturist. This means they've passed national exams or met your state's training requirements. If you're outside the U.S., check with your local health board or traditional medicine council for certified providers.
- 3. Know what to expect at your visit** — A typical acupuncture session lasts about an hour. Your first visit might run longer because you'll discuss your symptoms and goals. The needling part usually takes 30 to 40 minutes, and you'll rest quietly during that time.
- 4. Pay attention to how you feel afterward** — Some people notice immediate results after one session, while others may need several. It's common to feel sleepy, relaxed, or even more alert right after. You might also notice better sleep, digestion, or mood over time — your body will respond in its own way.

If you want to learn more about how it works, read, "[Study Reveals Previously Unknown Mechanism Behind Acupuncture's Ability to Reduce Pain.](#)"

Not a Fan of Needles? Here's How You Can Still Try Acupuncture

Acupuncture involves more than just needles — methods like electricity, lasers, and acupressure can also stimulate acupuncture points. For example, cancer patients receiving radiotherapy experienced reduced nausea and better sleep and mood, regardless of whether they received real or simulated acupuncture.

One popular needle-free technique is [Emotional Freedom Technique \(EFT\)](#), also called psychological acupressure. EFT involves tapping specific meridian points with the fingertips while focusing on a problem and voicing positive affirmations.¹⁴ This process

helps clear emotional blocks and restore balance in your body's energy system, which is essential for healing and overall well-being. You can practice EFT on your own, but for better results, working with a skilled practitioner is recommended.

Drug-Free Therapies That Support ICU Recovery

Acupuncture isn't the only tool that helps the body heal without relying on more medications. ICU patients often deal with pain, sleep disruption, anxiety, and muscle weakness – issues that aren't always solved with pharmaceutical interventions alone. You can also try out:

- **Mindfulness practices** – Practices like focused attention meditation can help dial down pain intensity. These techniques change how the brain interprets pain signals, offering relief with virtually no side effects.
- **Massage therapy** – Massage has been shown to ease muscle tension, reduce anxiety, and improve sleep in patients recovering from surgery or critical illness. It's a gentle, noninvasive option that may improve circulation and reduce discomfort associated with long-term bed rest.
- **Music therapy** – Live or recorded music – especially when personalized to the patient – has been shown to reduce ICU-related anxiety, lower blood pressure, and help calm patients during mechanical ventilation. Music stimulates brain areas involved in healing and relaxation, making it a powerful complement to acupuncture and other sensory-based therapies.
- **Post-ICU lifestyle habits that help with recovery** – After ICU discharge, implementing healthy lifestyle habits is vital to support the healing process. Here are important considerations to remember:
 - **Swap seed oils for stable fats** – Too much **linoleic acid (LA)** from oils like soybean, corn, and sunflower drives chronic inflammation. Reducing LA to below 5 grams per day may support mitochondrial health and reduce oxidative

stress in recovery. Cut out vegetable oils and choose stable fats like ghee or beef tallow.

If you want to take the guesswork out of seed oils, I recommend signing up for the Mercola Health Coach app, which is due out shortly. Its Seed Oil Sleuth feature will help you track your LA intake automatically.

- **Eat more omega-3s from clean sources** – [Krill oil](#) or wild-caught fish like Alaskan salmon help cool inflammation and protect cells. These fats support recovery of the heart, brain, and immune system after illness or trauma.
- **Get regular, safe sun exposure** – Sunlight boosts vitamin D, which plays a role in immune function and pain sensitivity. Just 15 to 30 minutes a day can help rebalance circadian rhythms and mood after hospitalization. However, make sure to eliminate LA from your diet for at least four to six months before getting peak midday sun exposure. Read "[Beyond Vitamin D Production – How Sensible Sun Exposure Supports Overall Health](#)" for more information.

Acupuncture isn't here to replace modern medicine – it's here to help the body remember how to heal. In the ICU, machines and medications keep patients stable, but recovery begins when balance returns. Even when illness drains strength, sleep, and clarity, acupuncture offers steady hope: it calms the nervous system, eases stress and pain, and creates the quiet conditions where healing can begin again.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About How Acupuncture Supports ICU Recovery

Q: What is acupuncture, and how does it work?

A: Acupuncture is a natural therapy that involves stimulating specific points on the body, usually with thin, sterile needles, to promote healing. It is based on the flow of 'Qi' (pronounced chee), or life energy. When Qi is blocked, pain and illness can

develop. Acupuncture helps restore that flow, reducing pain, enhancing sleep, and supporting the immune system, all by activating the body's own healing response.

Q: How can acupuncture help with inflammation and sepsis in ICU patients?

A: Studies suggest acupuncture may reduce inflammation, oxidative stress, and tiny blood vessel damage seen in sepsis, while supporting immune balance. Small trials found lower sepsis severity scores, though it does not replace standard infection treatment.

Q: What ICU problems can acupuncture support at the same time?

A: Reviews report acupuncture may support pain control, anxiety and stress relief, sleep quality, reduced medication side effects, breathing support, circulation and immune function, digestion and nutrition, and physical recovery during critical illness.

Q: What role does EFT play in ICU-friendly acupuncture care?

A: Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) use fingertip tapping on acupuncture points to calm the nervous system and release emotional tension. It's a needle-free option that offers many of acupuncture's benefits for patients uncomfortable with or ineligible for needles.

Q: What lifestyle changes support drug-free recovery after ICU discharge?

A: Reducing seed oils, consuming clean omega-3s, and getting safe sunlight can decrease inflammation, aid immune repair, and restore your body's rhythm — all without needing additional medications.

Sources and References

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