

Acupuncture Research Update

Viva La Vagus Nerve: Acupuncture & VNS

A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song. – Chinese Proverb

The Vagus nerve has achieved near rockstar notoriety in the world of health these days, while having nothing to do with a certain high energy city in Nevada, though you may need your vagus nerve stimulated after a few days in the discordant noises and flashing lights of Las Vegas.

When you think of the Vagus nerve, think relaxation. The Vagus (Latin for wandering) nerve is the longest of the cranial nerves and the main nerve of the parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system activates our “rest and digest” functions to counterbalance the “fight or flight” mode of the sympathetic nervous system. It originates in the brainstem and travels to innervate the heart, lung, stomach, pancreas, liver, small intestines, and half of the large intestines. It helps to regulate heart rate, respiration and digestion and is considered the main communication route responsible for the famous gut-brain axis.

Recent research has added to the exciting promise it holds for health and wellness as Vagus Nerve Stimulation (VNS) has been shown to inhibit oxidative stress and reduce inflammation.¹ Clinical trials focused on VNS have shown benefit in the treatment of inflammatory conditions such as Crohn’s disease and Rheumatoid arthritis. Additional benefits are seen in the frontal lobe activation that vagal stimulation can influence. Frontal brain activity is associated with better decision making and healthier lifestyle choices which correspond with a general reduction in disease. Basically, when we are relaxed, we can think better. It makes sense then that greater Heart Rate Variability (HRV), a health measure directly linked to VNS, predicts better health outcomes.²

So where does Acupuncture come in? Well you guessed it: one of the ways acupuncture works it’s magic is by stimulating the vagus nerve. Harvard researchers have found that acupuncture stimulates the vagal-adrenal axis and can alleviate systemic inflammation by calming cytokine storms (excessive immune reactions).³ This mechanism can help explain some of the extensive benefits of acupuncture such as its success in treating various inflammatory, immune and nervous disorders as well as its general ability to help bring the body back into homeostasis.

Auricular (ear) acupuncture is an area of focus for the growing interest in VNS. When that long nerve leaves the brain stem, a branch travels up into the ear, giving us more direct external access to the internal workings of this nerve. Both ear acupuncture and ear acupressure have both shown to elicit vagal tone. There have also been



recent developments specifically for the ear: non-invasive VNS devices that attach to the ear and can be self-administered at home. These increase the relaxation response, and can be used for issues like anxiety and various inflammatory issues.⁵

In our increasingly busy (yang) world, it is important to slow down, take some deep breaths and access the power of the vagus nerve (yin) to calm your system and regain a sense of balance. In a pinch, try massaging your ears, and while you’re at it be sure to schedule your next acupuncture appointment so you can experience the full benefits of VNS!

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¹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnins.2019.00877/full>

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30347734/>

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/202112/acupuncture-may-reduce-inflammation-vagus-nerve-pathways>

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23304215/>

⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201907/vagus-nerve-stimulation-the-outer-ear-takes-center-stage>

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