Acupuncture treatment of patients with radiation-induced xerostomia

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Abstract

Xerostomia is a common and usually irreversible side effects in patients receiving radiation therapy (> 50 Gy) for head and neck cancer. Of 38 patients with radiation-induced xerostomia, 20 in the experimental group were treated with classical acupuncture and 18 patients in the control group received superficial acupuncture as placebo. Within both groups the patients showed significantly increased salivary flow rates after the acupuncture treatment. In the experimental group 68% and in the control group 50% of the patients had increased salivary flow rates at the end of the observation period. Among those patients who had had all their salivary glands irradiated, 50% in both groups showed increased salivary flow rates (> 20%) by the end of the observation period of 1 year. The study indicates that among the patients who had increased salivary flow rates already after the first 12 acupuncture sessions, the majority had high probability of continual improvement after the completion of acupuncture treatment. The improved salivary flow rates usually persisted during the observation year. The changes observed in the control group were somewhat smaller and appeared after a longer latency phase. Significant differences for salivary flow rates could be observed only within each group, and there were no statistically significant differences between the groups. There were no differences in the improvement of salivary flow rates between those patients who were irradiated within a year before the acupuncture treatment and those who had received radiation therapy several years earlier. The results indicate that acupuncture might be a useful method for the treatment of radiation-induced xerostomia, and that superficial acupuncture should preferably not be used as placebo acupuncture.

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