

## Managing Risks in Acupuncture

Acupuncture generally is considered safe for patients and is used to treat various physical and emotional issues, such as pain disorders, anxiety, sleep conditions, depression, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, postoperative pain, and much more.

The practice of acupuncture also is considered low risk in terms of liability exposure. However, acupuncturists — like any type of healthcare

provider — face challenges and potential perils in everyday practice. These issues might be related to procedural skill, scope of practice, infection prevention, adverse outcomes, communication, documentation, or various other factors.

The following tips offer high-level guidance to help acupuncturists and acupuncture practices mitigate common risk and safety issues.<sup>1</sup>

1

Be aware of the educational, training, certification, and licensure requirements for acupuncturists in the state(s) in which you practice, including requirements for professional development and continuing education to maintain certification and/or licensure.

2

Understand scope of practice for acupuncturists as defined by state practice acts, licensing and accreditation bodies, and professional associations. Scope of practice also should take into account competency, skill, and experience.

3

Ensure your practice has a comprehensive process in place for hiring qualified and competent acupuncturists, other licensed providers, and support staff. The process should include verifying credentials and references and conducting state and federal criminal background checks (including sex offender registries).

4

Provide all patients with pertinent information, such as practice policies and patient rights and responsibilities. Clearly communicate these policies and make them accessible via your practice's website, portal, social media, etc.

5

Develop strategies for managing patient complaints and dealing with patients who may potentially become angry, threatening, or violent. Train staff on [de-escalation techniques](#) and security protocols, including when to call law enforcement.

6

Screen patients for contraindications to acupuncture treatment (including herbal treatment) or conditions that carry potential risk, such as severe neutropenia, infections, pregnancy, bleeding disorders, pacemakers or mechanical heart valves, and skin conditions or open wounds.

7

Be knowledgeable about adverse events associated with both traditional acupuncture and electroacupuncture treatment (e.g., fainting, pain, bleeding, burns, cardiac events, and organ injuries), and be prepared to manage these events should they occur.

8

Adhere to a standardized informed consent process that includes a discussion of potential risks and benefits associated with treatment. Use clear, concise language when talking to patients, and provide patients with plain-language educational materials and/or instructions. Document the informed consent process and any related forms in patients' health records.

9

Use qualified interpreters and auxiliary aids to assist with communication and comprehension for patients who have limited English proficiency or communication disabilities.

10

Verify that each patient's health record contains thorough and appropriate information, such as the patient's main reason for seeking care, their symptoms, medical history, allergies, physical assessment, detailed treatment plan, and follow-up recommendations.

11

Develop and implement a comprehensive infection prevention and control plan that includes evidence-based policies and procedures related to hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, personal protective equipment, needle safety and handling, bloodborne pathogen exposure, aseptic technique, environmental cleaning, and patient handling.

12

Only use sterile, single-use needles to prevent the transmission of diseases and to comply with U.S. Food and Drug Administration requirements. Ensure proper disposal of needles in a designated sharps container that is properly sealed.

13

Be aware of any specific state regulations or guidance related to infection prevention and control in the practice of acupuncture.

14

Develop policies for appropriate and thorough decontamination of reusable instruments and devices (e.g., cupping equipment), and make sure they are clearly differentiated from single-use disposable devices.

15

Provide all staff members with thorough training on infection prevention and control policies, procedures, and best practices. Training should occur at hire, periodically thereafter (e.g., annually), and when special needs arise.

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## Resources

- [American Academy of Medical Acupuncture: Acupuncture Requirements by State](#)
- [MedPro Group: Checklist: Documentation Essentials](#)
- [MedPro Group: Checklist: Due Diligence in Hiring Healthcare Employees](#)
- [MedPro Group: Guideline: Communicating Effectively With Patients to Improve Quality and Safety](#)
- [MedPro Group: Guideline: Infection Prevention and Control in Ambulatory Care Settings](#)
- [MedPro Group: Guideline: Risk Management Strategies for Informed Consent](#)
- [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health: Acupuncture: Effectiveness and Safety](#)
- [National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine: State Licensure Requirements Interactive Map](#)
- [StatPearls: Acupuncture](#)

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The risk tips in this publication are based on various MedPro Group resources and the following sources: Yang, E., & Yeh, G. Y. (2023, June 9). Overview of the clinical uses of acupuncture. *UpToDate*. Retrieved from [www.uptodate.com/contents/overview-of-the-clinical-uses-of-acupuncture](http://www.uptodate.com/contents/overview-of-the-clinical-uses-of-acupuncture); Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.). *Acupuncture*. Retrieved from [www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/acupuncture](http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/acupuncture); McMaster University Health Sciences. (n.d.). *Acupuncture needling — contraindications and potential adverse effects*. Retrieved from <https://acupuncture.mcmaster.ca/courses/acupuncture-needling-contraindications-and-potential-adverse-effects/>; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Complementary and Integrative Medicine. (2022, October [last updated]). *Acupuncture: Effectiveness and safety*. Retrieved from [www.nccih.nih.gov/health/acupuncture-effectiveness-and-safety](http://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/acupuncture-effectiveness-and-safety); Crawford, P. F., 3rd, Moss, D. A., Hawks, M. K., & Snyder, M. J. (2021). Integrative medicine: Acupuncture. *FP Essentials*, 505, 18–22; Xu, M., Yang, C., Nian, T., Tian, C., Zhou, L., Wu, Y., Li, Y., Deng, X., Li, X., & Yang, K. (2023). Adverse effects associated with acupuncture therapies: An evidence mapping from 535 systematic reviews. *Chinese Medicine*, 18(1), 38. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13020-023-00743-7>; Park, J. H., Lee, J. H., Lee, S., Shin, J. Y., & Kim, T. H. (2020). Adverse events related to electroacupuncture: A systematic review of single case studies and case series. *Acupuncture in Medicine: Journal of the British Medical Acupuncture Society*, 38(6), 407–416. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964528420920287>

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