
Healing the Whole Veteran: Integrative Solutions for Pain and Disability in the VA



EMORY
UNIVERSITY

Anna Woodbury, MD, MSc, CAc

Associate Professor | Vice Chair of Research

Anesthesiology | Pain Medicine

Emory University School of Medicine

Disclaimers and Disclosures

- *The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government.*
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Outline

- Statistics
- Complementary & Integrative Health/ Whole Health
- Battlefield Acupuncture
- Auricular Neuromodulation



Chronic Pain in Veterans

- U.S. veterans experience higher rates of chronic pain compared to nonveterans, as well as higher prevalence and more severe pain.
- One in ten (9.1%) veterans live with **severe** chronic **pain**.
- Veterans had similar or higher adjusted prevalence of pain across various types compared to nonveterans even after equalizing for age, sex, race, and ethnicity.



1. <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/pain/veterans>

2. <https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/health-programs-for-veterans-living-with-chronic-pain>

3. <https://uspainfoundation.org/news/the-impact-of-pain-in-america/>

4. Taylor KA, Kapos FP, Sharpe JA, Kosinski AS, Rhon DI, Goode AP. Seventeen-Year National Pain Prevalence Trends Among U.S. Military Veterans. medRxiv [Preprint]. 2023 Apr 10:2023.03.27.23287408. doi: 10.1101/2023.03.27.23287408. Update in: J Pain. 2024 May;25(5):104420. doi: 10.1016/j.jpain.2023.11.003. PMID: 37034604; PMCID: PMC10081421.

Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH)

If a CIH approach to medical treatment (i.e., yoga, acupuncture) is used along with conventional medicine, it is **complementary**.

Integrative health refers to the coordination of complementary and conventional healthcare approaches.

Integrative Medicine

Biologically-Based

Manipulative

Energy

Mind-Body

Whole Medical
Systems

Ayurveda
Traditional Chinese
Medicine
Homeopathy

Music, Art, Dance
Therapy
CBT
Meditation & Prayer

Herbs
Vitamins
Foods

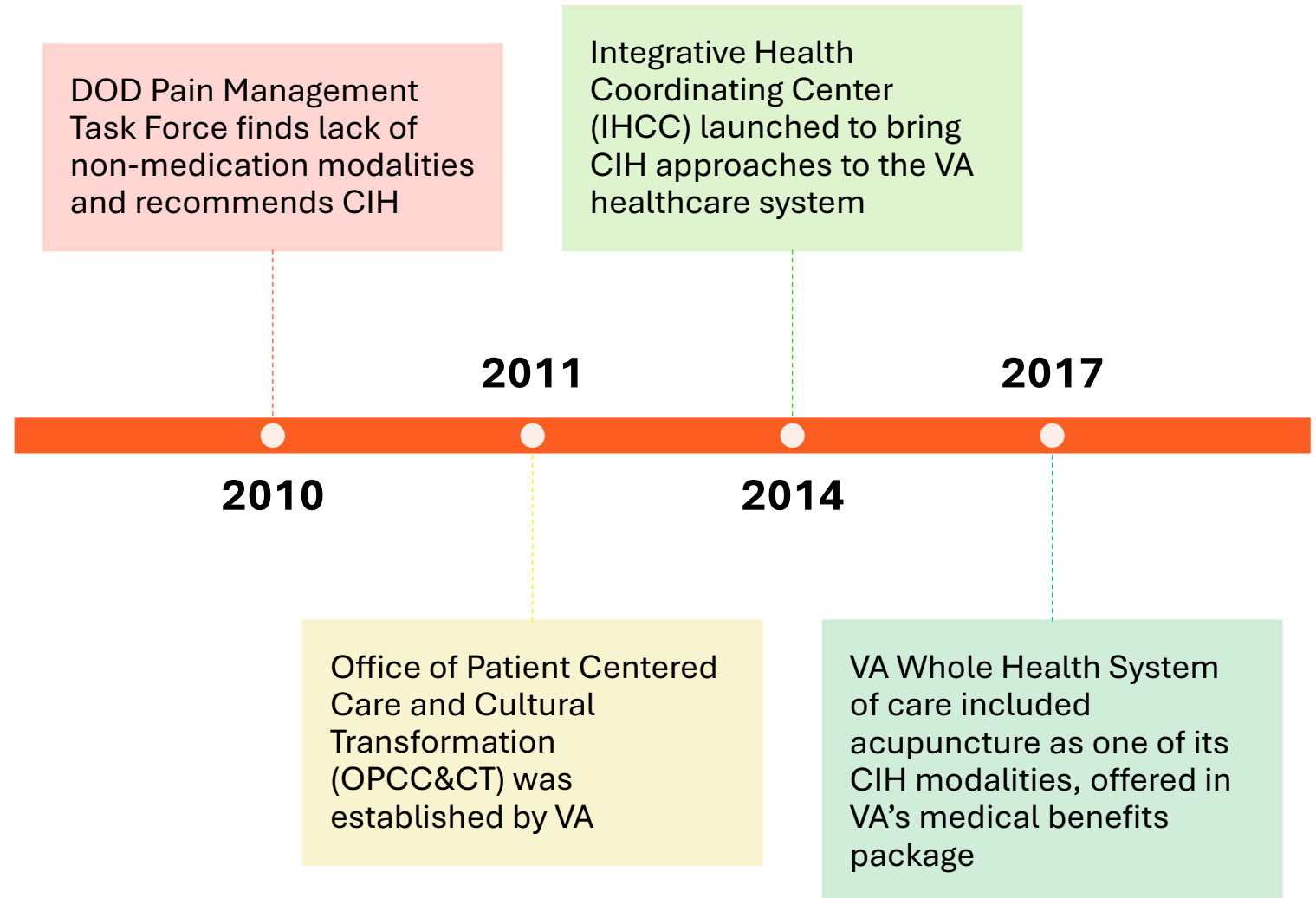
Chiropractic
Osteopathy
Massage

Qi Gong/Tai Chi
Acupuncture
Reiki

Combines conventional (standard) therapies
(such as drugs and surgery) with
complementary therapies (such as
acupuncture and yoga)

<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/>

Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH) in the VA System



VA Evidence Based Synthesis Briefs



Massage (update from 2018-2023)
According to the new evidence, massage therapy is likely to be of benefit for conditions such as chronic low back pain, fibromyalgia, and myofascial pain.

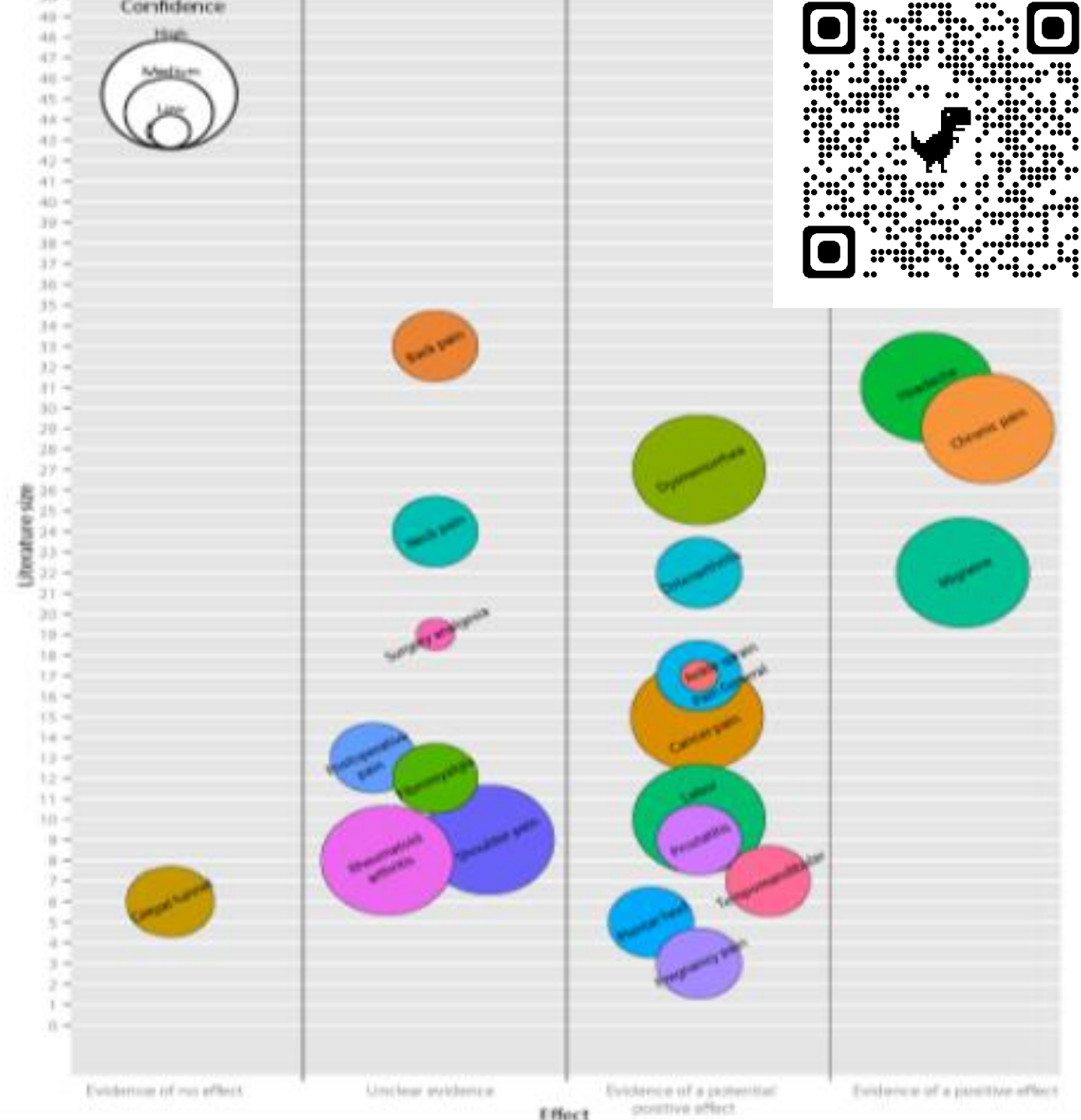


Other evidence maps include acupuncture, mindfulness, tai chi, hypnosis, biofeedback, guided imagery, and yoga.

Evidence Map of Acupuncture for Pain

- The bubble plot summarizes the results of 59 systematic reviews for 21 distinct indications relevant to the outcome pain [search date: March 2013].
- Most recently updated in 2021 with growing evidence for fibromyalgia, though need more RCTs relative to systematic reviews.

<https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/publications/esp/acupuncture.pdf>



Whole Health Class Description

- Currently all Classes are Virtual -

Whole Health Introduction

This one time, 2-hour class will introduce you to the basic principles of Whole Health and 8 areas of your life that are most important as you work to improve your health and well-being. This class also begins the important process of self-reflection about what matters to you.
Both Co-Ed and Women's Only classes available.

Chair & Mat Yoga

Yoga is movement combined with breathing and helps make connection with our physical bodies, regulate the nervous system, and practice attention management. Yoga is traditionally practiced on a mat on the floor, but this class is adapted for chair practice.
Both Co-Ed and Women's Only classes available.

Basics of Stress Reduction

This class that introduces participants to essential components of stress reduction skills and helps Veterans to assess their skills in this area and how to utilize self-care in their lives.

Developing Healthy Relationships

Veterans explore what is important to them about their relationships and what aspects of relationships are most meaningful. They will explore ways to maintain trust and good communication.

Adaptations

Want to be more physically active but concerned about limitations or the possibility of injury or increased pain? If so-then this class is for you. Work with an Occupational Therapist to learn how to safely incorporate physical activity into your daily routine.

Taking Charge of My Life and Health

This 4-week class is the follow up to Whole Health Introduction. Participants will discuss what changes you may want to make to maximize your health and well-being and explore further the question- "what matters most to you?"
Both Co-Ed and Women's Only classes available.

Mindfulness Meditation

Class begins with a 1-hour introduction session after which you can sign-up for the 7-week Mindfulness Meditation class. Mindfulness is the practice of bringing your attention to the present moment with openness and non-judgement. Mindful Meditation can help reduce insomnia, stress, chronic pain and depression.

Tai Chi

Tai Chi is a mindful moving meditation that incorporates regulating the breath, adjusting the posture, and helping your "Qi" flow. Rooted in ancient Asian traditions, Qi is your vital energy. When your Qi freely flows, you are balanced and healthy.

Writing to Heal

In this series you will examine the healing power of reflective writing. During each class we will explore; a different aspect of the connection between writing and healing, read and discuss a short piece of writing, and practice various types of expressive writing.

Cooking for Wellness

This class focuses on the basics of healthy cooking with tips and strategies to improve your overall health and nutrition. You will learn to prepare simple delicious recipes.

Food as Medicine

Your Food is Your medicine! Learn the basics of Nutrition including how much fiber and water you need, the basics of gut health, anti-inflammatory meal planning, as well as macronutrient, vitamin and minerals needs.

Heart Math/Resilience

HeartMath is a stress management system that will empower you to self-regulate emotions, reduce stress and increase resilience. Participants learn biofeedback techniques and receive a biofeedback device.

Health Promotion through Physical Activity

A nine-course series covering various topics as it relates to improving one's health by increasing physical activity levels. This course is designed to educate and empower Veterans to adopt a more active role in improving their quality of life.

- Introduction to musculoskeletal health & wellness
- Components of health and wellness
- Psychology of physical activity
- Influence of physical activity on cholesterol & diabetes
- Influence of physical activity on chronic stress & hypertension
- Low back pain and wellness
- Orthopedic joint replacements and physical activity
- Chronic pain and physical activity
- Designing your own exercise program



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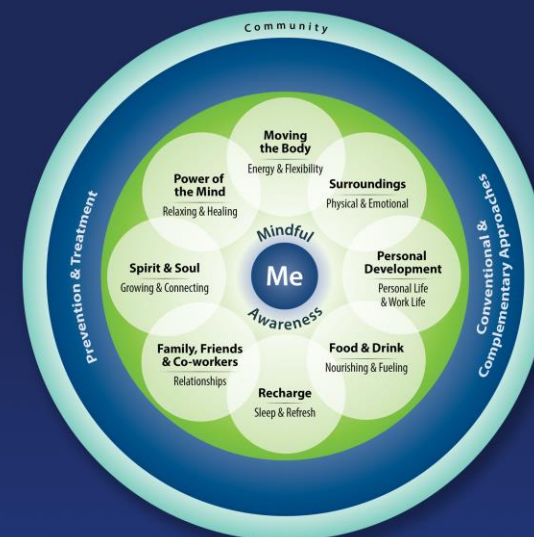


Whole Health

Also offered at Atlanta VA:

- Chiropractic
- Medical Massage
- Acupuncture

Atlanta VA Health Care System a "WHOLE HEALTH" CARE SYSTEM



<https://www.va.gov/atlanta-health-care/programs/whole-health/>

Battlefield Acupuncture

- Developed in 2001 by Richard Niemtzow, Air Force radiation oncologist and flight surgeon
 - Grouped 5 acupuncture points in a certain sequence to address acute and chronic pain
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Veterans receive battlefield acupuncture treatment at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. An eye mask and soothing music in the background help create a relaxing environment. *(Photo by Robert Turtill)*

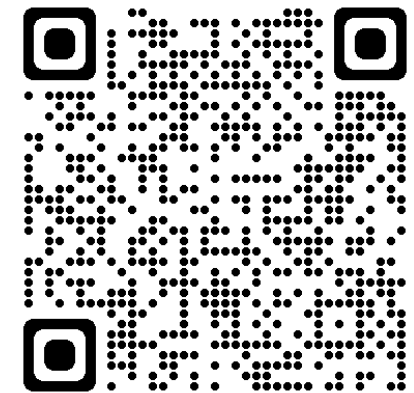
Battlefield acupuncture

Patient Feedback on the Effectiveness of Auricular Acupuncture on Pain in Routine Clinical Care: The Experience of 11,406 Veterans

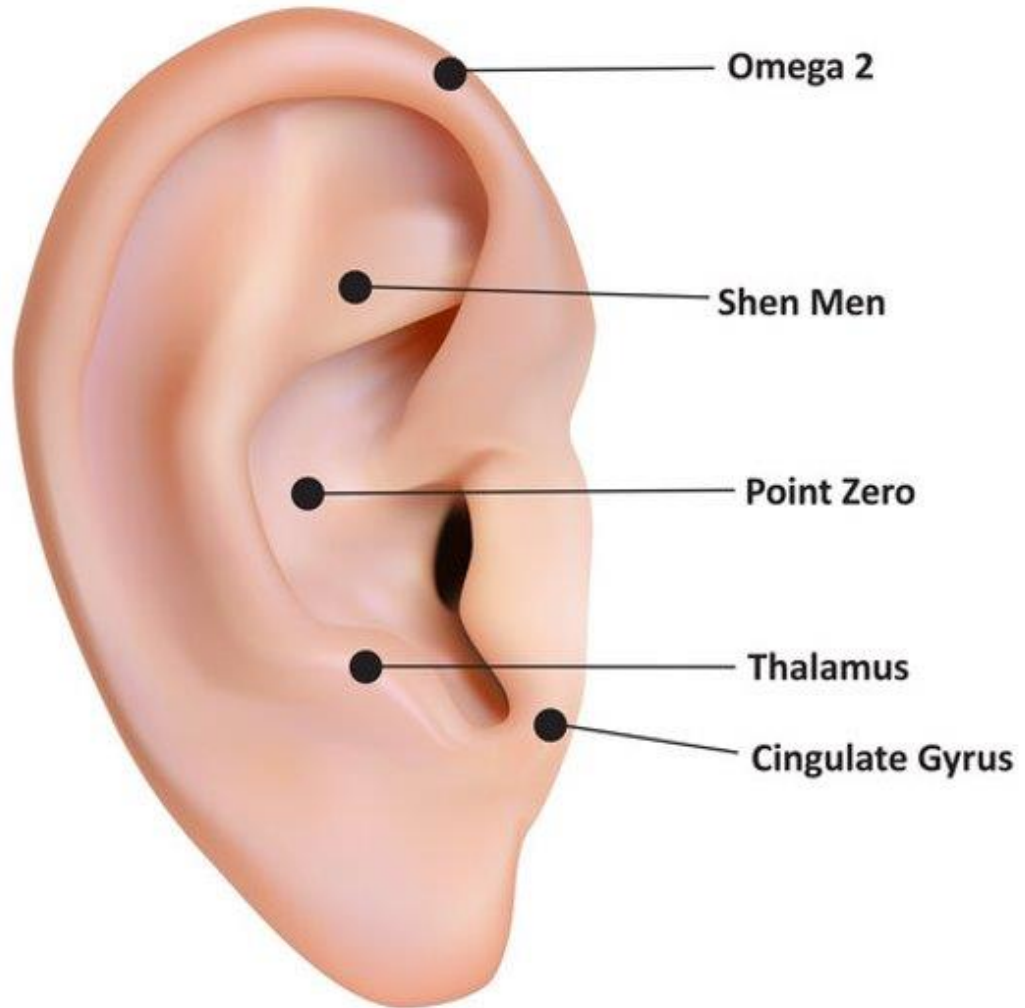
Steven B Zeliadt ^{1 2}, Eva R Thomas ¹, Juli Olson ³, Scott Coggeshall ¹, Karleen Giannitrapani ⁴, Princess E Ackland ^{5 6}, Kavitha P Reddy ^{7 8}, Daniel G Federman ^{9 10}, David F Drake ^{11 12 13}, Benjamin Kligler ^{12 14}, Stephanie L Taylor ^{15 16}

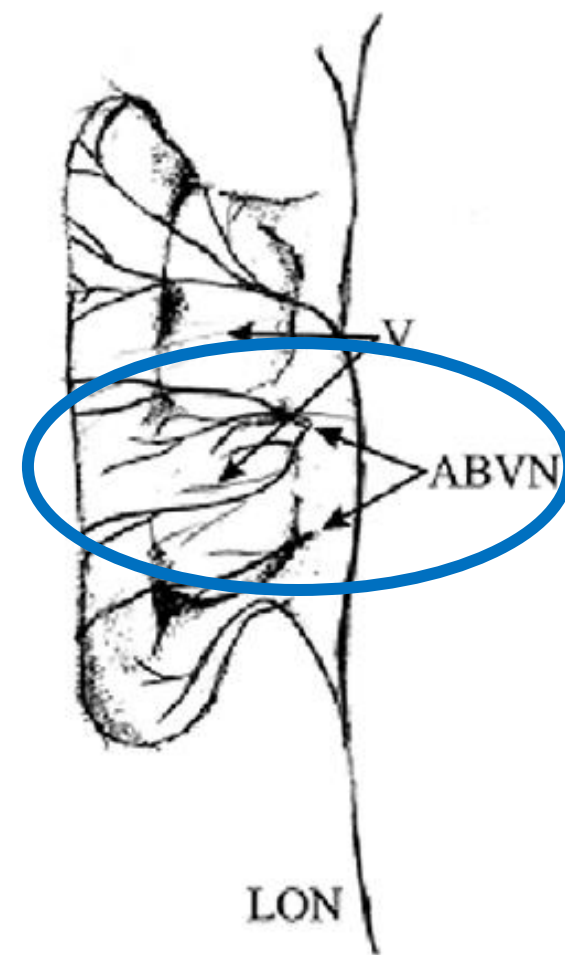
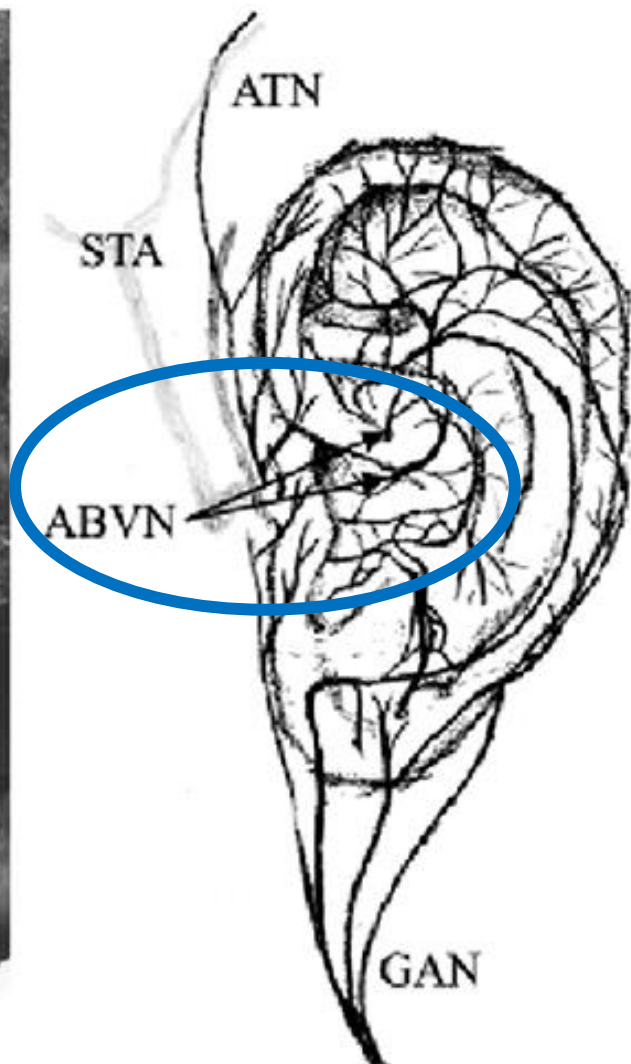
- Retrospective analysis (September 2020)
- Over $\frac{3}{4}$ experienced immediate pain decrease
- 60% reported MCID; average decrease was 2.5 points
- Opioid use in the past year = less improvement

PMID: 32826779 PMCID: PMC7497594



Battlefield Acupuncture Protocol





The vagus: a mixed nerve

- 80% afferent fibers
(input to CNS)
- 20% efferent fibers
(output to body)

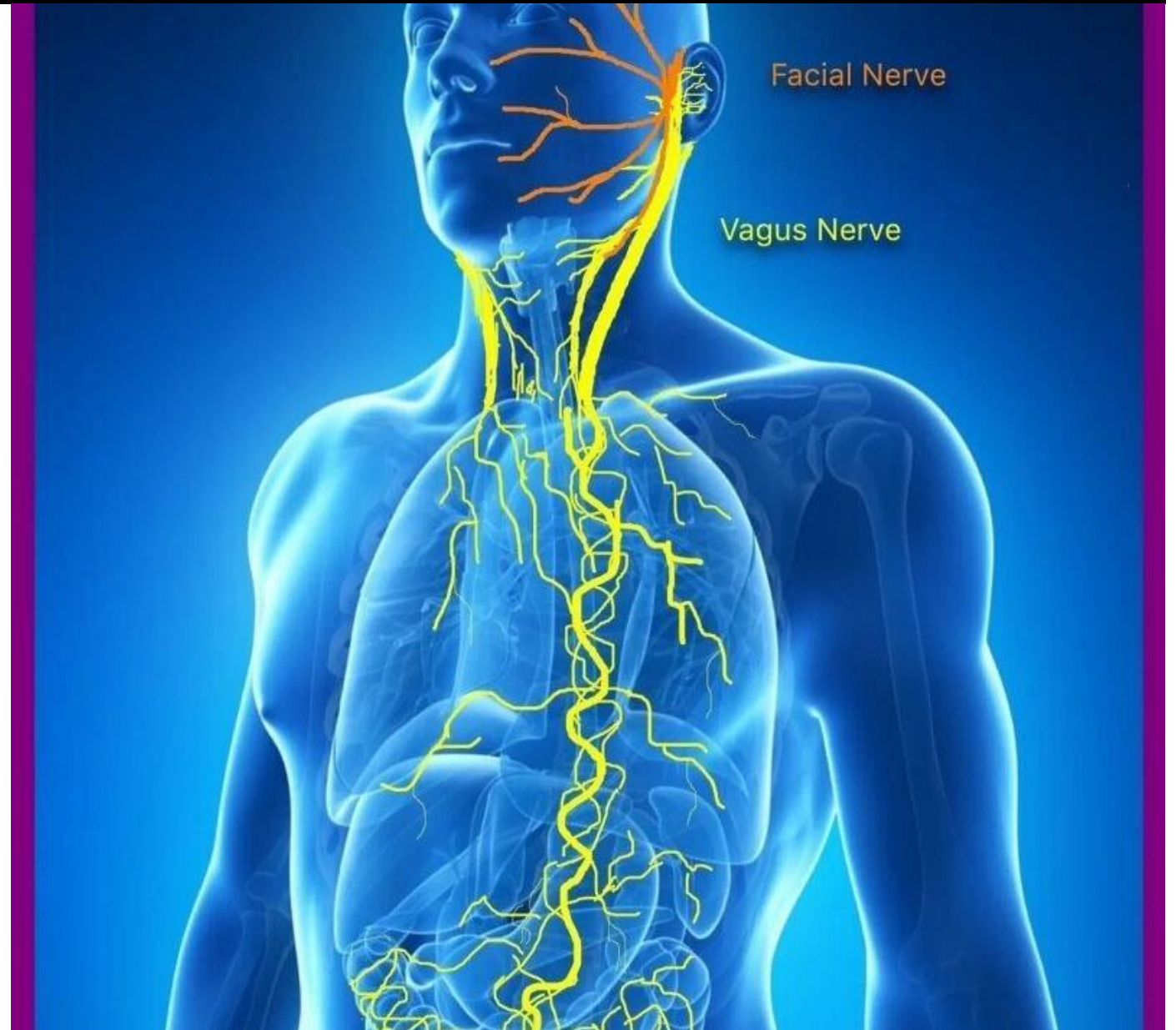


Photo Credit: Bruno Bordoni, PhD in StatPearls

Trans-auricular Vagus Nerve Stimulation (taVNS) - investigational



Cranial Electrotherapy Stimulation (CES)

- Brain is stimulated by a tiny current of electricity, ≤ 600 millionths of an ampere
- FDA recognizes CES as a Class II device for the treatment of depression, anxiety, and insomnia, and research backs its efficacy at treating pain and stress disorders
- Thought to modulate brain cells to return them to a healthy, normal state



Summary

- Veterans experience higher rates of pain and pain severity than the general population
- Nonpharmacologic approaches are available in the VA and recommended based on evidence-based synthesis briefs (can the rest of the US also integrate?)
- Battlefield acupuncture is an easy to apply ear acupuncture technique
- Other targeted auricular therapies are available and under study for chronic pain, and the hope is that these will be covered by insurance in the future, if found effective