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Should You Try Ear Acupuncture or Ear Seeds for Weight Loss?

Everything you ever wanted to know about ear acupuncture, including whether or not it can help you lose weight.

By [Julia Malacoff](#) | Sep 20, 2017



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Acupuncture is increasingly gaining cred in the medical community, thanks to research that shows it likely helps with common ailments like [back pain](#), [seasonal allergies](#), and even [stress](#). Celebrities seem to be pretty big fans of the practice, too, which means it's all over our social media feeds. It's no longer weird to see celebrities post a selfie with acupuncture needles still in their face (looking at you, [Bar Refaeli](#)), and it seems like everyone and their mother has tried [cupping therapy](#), another treatment provided by acupuncturists.

One trend that hasn't gotten *quite* as much attention? Acupuncture ear seeds, which are part of a larger practice called "auriculotherapy" or "ear acupuncture." Why the lack of attention? It might be because ear seeds are so tiny, it's almost impossible to tell someone is wearing them. That's also probably why celebrities like Penélope Cruz feel comfortable wearing them out and about to [film premieres](#). Research suggests that the practice may be helpful in treating conditions like [insomnia](#) and [PTSD](#), plus might even [help people lose weight](#). So what's the deal with these tiny little seeds, and what can they *really* do? We talked to experts to find out.

What are ear seeds?

"Acupuncture is originally from China and is based on the model of 14 major meridians, or pathways that crisscross the human body," explains [Tony Burris, L.Ac.](#), a licensed acupuncturist. "Acupuncture points are located along these meridians, almost like a connect-the-dots image." As you know if you've ever tried acupuncture, needles are inserted into these points during acupuncture in order to achieve a specific result, whether it's treating symptoms or helping to prevent them. While some early Chinese texts do talk about stimulating specific points on the ear, the idea of ear acupuncture actually became popular much more recently than you might expect. "It wasn't until the 1950s that a French physician named Paul Nogier developed the idea of a microsystem on the ear," Burris says. "Since then, Chinese researchers and doctors have added onto Nogier's work, and we have a complete system known as auricular acupuncture, or auriculotherapy."

The idea is that the various points on the ear correspond to different organs and systems within the body. And while the most effective method of stimulating these points is with needles, "ear seed use was developed to give the patient some stimulation to acupuncture points even if they weren't in an office," Burris explains. Often, they're applied at the end of an acupuncture session to prolong the effects. "Tiny pellets, called ear seeds, come already attached to skin-colored adhesive surgical tape, and are applied to precisely located points on the outer ear," notes Davida Mitchell, L.Ac., a doctor of acupuncture and Oriental medicine. "Ear seeds are usually actual seeds from the vaccaria plant or tiny metal beads."

Any licensed acupuncturist can place ear seeds for you, according to Diem Truong of [Soho Acupuncture Center](#), but it's a good idea to ask about trying them ahead of time if you're set on them. "You don't need to be a specialist for it, but some acupuncturists do more work with ears seeds; the more you practice with it the better you get," Truong says.

What are they used for?

Pretty much everything, since there are points on the ear that correspond to virtually every part of the body. There are a few areas, though, where they seem to be most effective. "In my clinical practice, I use ear seeds with weight loss, addictions, and stress-related conditions," says [Dr. Stephen Chee](#), who is dual-trained as an M.D. and as an acupuncturist. "I find ear seeds to be most helpful in patients who are motivated to change and looking for something that they can physically do. I explain to patients it's useful as a 'pattern interrupt.'" So for example, if he has a patient who is dealing with stress eating, he'll place the ear seed on the corresponding point and then encourage them to apply pressure for 15 to 60

seconds and take some deep breaths when they get the urge to overindulge. Ear seeds are also commonly used for smoking cessation and drug withdrawal symptoms, according to Justin Chung, L.Ac., a licensed acupuncturist at [Raah Acupuncture](#).

How do they work?

Part of the reason ear acupuncture is used for so many different ailments has to do with how it works. "[Research](#) has suggested a connection between the vagus nerve and ear acupuncture," Dr. Chee explains. "The vagus nerve is intimately linked to the parasympathetic nervous system of the heart and the digestive tract." The parasympathetic nervous system acts like brakes on a car for the flight-or-fight instinct that we all have, which is powered by the sympathetic nervous system. "Pressing the ear seed is like pushing on the brakes," he says. So it makes sense, then, that pressing on an ear seed might help stop a panic attack, stress eating impulse, or drug craving.

Seeds aren't permanent, but they can be worn continuously. "I usually tell patients to leave them in until they fall out or until their next appointment, when I can remove them," Burris says. "Usually they will last for three to five days, but seeds are effective even if they last just one day."

Are they legit?

Science is still lacking when it comes to proving that ear seeds have any effects on your weight. But one preliminary study in the [Clinical Journal of Pain](#) found that in combination with exercise, ear acupuncture can help ease chronic low-back pain. Another review published just this year in [Pain Medicine](#) found that ear acupuncture was helpful in treating acute pain.

Burris points out that "there are no side effects, there's no discomfort, and in my 14 years of practice, most patients report that they absolutely receive a benefit from them." In other words, ear seeds are completely safe to use, so there's really no downside to trying them if you think they might be able to help you. Plus, [the placebo effect is pretty powerful](#). If you believe ear seeds will make a difference, particularly with anything emotional or pain-related, there's a pretty good chance you'll see at least some benefit from them.

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Tony Burris, L.Ac., is a licensed acupuncturist and clinical herbalist located in Eagle, Idaho. He helps frustrated and injured athletes and chronic pain sufferers discover a unique therapy system that provides long-lasting or even permanent pain relief. His patients include members of the San Diego Chargers, Washington Redskins, Denver Broncos, Chicago Bears and Detroit Lions. Tony also treats members of the Seattle Mariners, Olympic medalists, mixed martial artists and NCAA competitors. He is also the Team Acupuncturist for Boise's Treasure Valley Roller Girls and the Beet City Bombers. For more information, call Tony's office at 208-938-1277.