

# New hope for people who

Neck pain is the fourth largest cause of disability worldwide and two out of three of us will suffer with it at some point in our lives.<sup>1,2</sup> A recent randomised clinical trial has shown that two forms of complementary healthcare, lessons in the Alexander Technique and acupuncture, can each provide real benefit. The new study, called ATLAS, is published in the November issue of the prestigious *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Here, three authors of the ATLAS publication describe the study findings and the way that Alexander lessons or acupuncture may be able to help people with chronic neck pain.

## Introduction

The ATLAS study has shown that both the Alexander Technique and acupuncture led to a clinically significant long-term decrease in chronic neck pain.<sup>3</sup> This is good news because conventional treatment methods for chronic neck pain are acknowledged to have limited success.<sup>4</sup>

## How was the study conducted?

The ATLAS (Alexander Technique Lessons or Acupuncture Sessions) trial was carried out by researchers in the Department of Health Sciences at the University of York and funded by Arthritis Research UK. A total of 517 patients with chronic neck pain (pain that had persisted for three months or more) were recruited from GP practices in Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield and York. The average duration of neck pain turned out to be six years, so this was a particularly challenging population to be able to help.

They were randomly allocated to one of three groups that offered:

- twenty one-to-one, 30-minute Alexander Technique lessons (along with continuing usual NHS care), or
- twelve 50-minute acupuncture sessions based on traditional Chinese medical theory (along with continuing NHS usual care), or
- continuing usual NHS care alone.

The Alexander lessons and acupuncture sessions were delivered within the first five months or so of the beginning of the trial. For all three groups, usual NHS care continued throughout the 12 months of the study and included prescribed medications and visits to GPs, physiotherapists and other healthcare

professionals. It is important to note that the trial was not designed to be a comparison of Alexander lessons and acupuncture; instead, it evaluated the effectiveness of Alexander lessons compared with usual care alone and of acupuncture compared with usual care alone.

## What were the findings?

Participants in the groups that attended either the one-to-one Alexander lessons or the acupuncture sessions had, on average, nearly a third less pain and disability at the end of the trial than at the start 12 months previously. These reductions in pain and associated disability (31% for those taking Alexander lessons and 32% for those receiving acupuncture) exceeded the threshold of a 25% reduction often used to determine whether improvements are clinically meaningful. Furthermore, when comparing the benefits of Alexander lessons or acupuncture with usual care alone, the reductions in pain and disability were also found to be statistically significant.

The study also found that people's confidence in their own ability to manage or reduce their pain without using medication (self-efficacy) increased in the groups attending Alexander lessons or acupuncture sessions, and much more so than in the group who received usual care alone. These increases in self-efficacy were associated with a greater reduction in pain and associated disability. The findings are consistent with the general view that approaches that empower people to take better care of themselves are more likely to be effective. In these times of an ageing population and ever tighter healthcare budgets, effective approaches such as these that include self-care are especially welcome.



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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# suffer from neck pain

## Why else might these 'new' approaches be needed?

Faced with pain, our natural tendency is to look for quick and easy solutions, such as painkillers or rest, not realising that the underlying cause of our problems may be ourselves, the way we go about our everyday activities and react to the world. Neck pain is often caused by poor postural and movement habits, rather than by serious underlying disease or injury.

Conventional medical treatment such as painkillers can be very effective for reducing neck pain when it first occurs, but in some individuals the symptoms persist and the problem becomes chronic. Subtle changes begin in the muscles and other soft tissues of the neck, changes that provoke continuing neck tension and pain<sup>4</sup> and become increasingly difficult to reverse as time passes.

The people who participated in the ATLAS trial had already experienced neck pain for an average of six years and it is very encouraging that they were still able to gain significant benefit from their Alexander lessons or acupuncture sessions. Nevertheless, the sooner that effective help is sought, and the greater the range of effective options to choose from, the better.

## How might these approaches work?

Chronic neck pain is considered a complex condition and several aspects may need to be dealt with in order to manage it. These may include an individual's habitual responses to pain-causing or other unwelcome stimuli, plus the harmful influence of poor body awareness on general co-ordination and the functioning of postural support and balance systems.

The Alexander Technique is a self-care method that helps people deal with these and related issues. It is taught in practical lessons, usually one-to-one, involving spoken and hands-on guidance. During lessons, people are helped to become more body aware, improve their co-ordination, to observe and improve the functioning of their postural support and balance systems, and discover how to reduce those harmful postural and thinking habits that can contribute to pain, tension and stress. Learning happens through the practical experience of lessons (in much the same way as learning to ride a bicycle or drive a car) and by discovering and using the basic Alexander thinking skills that can

be carried through into the rest of life. When people resolve to apply the Technique in their daily lives they can be inspired and enabled to make beneficial long-term changes to the way they carry out their everyday activities, including working at a computer, walking, sitting or standing; and help themselves avoid, or at least reduce, neck pain.

Acupuncture can relieve pain by stimulating the body's own pain-relieving and self-healing functions. Acupuncture is based on the insertion of needles at carefully chosen points to trigger specific desired effects. Longer-term effects are associated with additional components of the therapy, such as diagnosis-based lifestyle advice.

## Is there other research showing that these approaches are effective?

The ATLAS results build on the existing clinical evidence base for these two approaches with respect to chronic musculoskeletal pain conditions. There are now several large randomised controlled trials that show the long-term benefit of Alexander lessons or acupuncture for people with chronic neck or back pain.<sup>3,5,6</sup> Other research suggests that Alexander lessons can be effective for a range of health-related conditions,<sup>7</sup> and acupuncture has been shown to be effective for low back pain, osteoarthritis and headache/migraine.<sup>8</sup>

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continued on p22



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from p21

### Choosing which approach to take

For individuals who are not able to gain sufficient long-term relief from their neck pain from usual medical treatment, there are now two additional approaches to try, thanks to the ATLAS trial findings. Choosing between Alexander lessons and acupuncture will depend on personal preference as both approaches have been found effective, but someone who is in a lot of pain may prefer to try acupuncture first. Alexander lessons are easier to follow when pain is less severe and are best suited to people with a particular interest in self-care.

These two interventions can be considered complementary in that acupuncture is a therapy with a self-care element, while Alexander lessons are primarily for teaching and learning a self-care method, yet have a therapeutic component. So a third approach may appeal to some people, one which the ATLAS paper suggests deserves study. That is to attend acupuncture sessions for initial pain relief and advice, and then Alexander lessons for life-long skills in self-care that continue pain reduction and help prevent relapses.

### Finding a suitable Alexander teacher or acupuncturist

It is important to find someone who is properly trained and insured by checking that they belong to a recognised professional association.

All the Alexander teachers in the ATLAS study belonged to the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT), the largest and longest-established professional association. STAT teachers have completed three years of full-time training and are expected to be committed to their continuing professional development. STAT provides an online directory where a postcode or town can be entered to obtain a list of local teachers. Group workshops or courses can provide a good introduction to the Alexander Technique and to the teacher, whereas one-to-one lessons provide greater

individual support. Prices for individual lessons vary according to location, but typically are between £30 and £50, depending on overhead costs etc, and concessions may be available.

Once the basics of the technique have been absorbed from a number of weekly lessons (ideally with a few twice-weekly at the beginning), they can generally become less frequent.

All the acupuncturists in the study belonged to the British Acupuncture Council (BACc), the largest and longest-established independent professional association. Acupuncturists have completed three years of full-time training and are expected to be committed to their continuing professional development. BACc provides an online directory where a postcode or town can be entered to obtain a list of local practitioners. Prices vary but typically are between £35 and £45.

### Further information

Further information about the Alexander Technique and how to find a teacher are available at [www.alexandertechnique.co.uk](http://www.alexandertechnique.co.uk).

Further information about acupuncture and how to find a practitioner are available at [www.acupuncture.org.uk](http://www.acupuncture.org.uk).

### Glossary

**Chronic neck pain:** neck pain that has lasted three months or longer.

**Self-efficacy** (in relation to pain): the extent to which people have confidence in their ability to manage or reduce their pain without increasing their medication.

**Randomised trial:** a clinical trial that randomly allocates the participants (by computer) to the different groups to help ensure these are as similar as possible at the beginning of the study, protecting against potential bias in the results.

**Controlled trial:** a clinical trial in which an intervention is compared against another intervention. The second intervention is often standard treatment (e.g. "usual NHS care"). A controlled trial allows the researchers to discover how much of any benefit is due to the intervention being tested and not to the natural tendency for people to gradually get better over time.

Choosing between Alexander lessons and acupuncture will depend on personal preference as both approaches have been found effective

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