



5 Facts You Need to Know

1. Dry needling is acupuncture.

The English word *acupuncture*, from the Latin word *acus* “needle” and the English word *puncture*, was coined to describe a surgical operation introduced to Europe from China in the late 17th century [1–6]. Acupuncture is the act of puncturing and stimulating the skin and underlying tissues with an acupuncture needle (a U.S. Food and Drug Administration [FDA]-regulated medical device) of up to six inches in length to cure, mitigate, treat, or prevent disease or other conditions. Acupuncture is based on anatomy, physiology, and pathology [1,6–9].

Dry needling is acupuncture that involves puncturing and stimulating a reactive (painful) acupuncture point (a circumscribed area of muscle or connective tissue), now referred to in the West as a trigger point, with an acupuncture needle of up to six inches in length to cure, mitigate, treat, or prevent disease or other conditions, especially musculoskeletal and connective tissue disorders, including musculoskeletal pain [1]. The reactive (painful) acupuncture point is identified by a flinch reaction on palpation [1].

Dry needling is not new. It was first described in the Chinese medical literature more than 2,000 years ago [1].

In a landmark study published in the journal *Pain* in 1977, Dr. Ronald Melzack, a scientist who revolutionized the study and treatment of pain, and colleagues showed that “every trigger point [reported in the Western medical literature] has a corresponding acupuncture point” [10]. Simply put, a trigger point is an acupuncture point.

Patient safety and quality of care are paramount. Therefore, the American Medical Association (AMA) [warns](#) that dry needling should only be performed by qualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physicians and acupuncturists [11].

2. Dry needling is unsafe when performed by unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists.



Patients need to be aware that dry needling is unsafe when performed by unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists, as demonstrated in the eight examples below.

Example 1

In Colorado, a physical therapist punctured freeskier Torin Yater-Wallace's right lung with an acupuncture needle, causing damage to the lung that allowed air to leave the lung and accumulate in the space between the lung and the chest wall (pleural space), causing the lung to collapse (a [traumatic pneumothorax](#)) [12,13]. He required [surgery](#) to insert a tube (thoracostomy or chest tube) into the pleural space to drain the air and allow the lung to re-expand [12]. He was hospitalized for five days [12].

Freeskier Torin Yater-Wallace gives a thumbs down in the St. Anthony Summit Medical Center in Frisco, Colorado, on November 29, 2013, during recovery from [surgery](#) to treat a [traumatic pneumothorax](#) that he suffered after

a physical therapist punctured his right lung with an acupuncture needle. (Photo: @TorinWallace)

Example 2

In Georgia, a physical therapist performed dry needling on a 15-year-old girl without obtaining the consent of her mother [14]. She collapsed from the dry needling [14].

Example 3

In Maryland, a physical therapist punctured a nerve in high school teacher Emily Kuykendall's left leg with an acupuncture needle, causing damage to the nerve that resulted in pain and suffering [15]. She required drugs to treat the pain [15].

"[The pain] is really taking a physical and emotional toll on me," Ms. Kuykendall wrote approximately three weeks after the dry needling-related nerve injury. "There is almost not a minute in the day that goes by that I wish that I had not gone to see [the physical therapist]" [15].

Example 4

A physical therapist punctured a patient's right lung with an acupuncture needle, causing damage to the lung that resulted in a [traumatic pneumothorax](#) [16]. She was hospitalized and required treatment for the [traumatic pneumothorax](#) [16].

Example 5

A physical therapist punctured a patient's left lung with an acupuncture needle, causing damage to the lung that resulted in a [traumatic pneumothorax](#) [16]. She was hospitalized and required treatment for the [traumatic pneumothorax](#) [16].

Example 6

A physical therapist was performing dry needling on a patient's hip when the handle of the acupuncture needle broke off—probably due to the physical therapist using excessive force when manipulating (rotating or pistoning) the acupuncture needle, leaving the shaft of the acupuncture needle lodged in the hip [16]. She was hospitalized and required surgery to remove the shaft of the acupuncture needle [16].

Example 7

A physical therapist punctured a patient's lung with an acupuncture needle, causing damage to the lung that resulted in a [traumatic pneumothorax](#) [16]. She required [surgery](#) to treat the [traumatic pneumothorax](#) [16]. She was hospitalized for three days [16].

Example 8

A physical therapist performed dry needling on a patient's calf while failing to adhere to basic infection prevention and control practices, causing an infection of the calf [16]. She required “intravenous therapy and two surgical procedures” to treat the infection of the calf [16].

3. It is illegal for unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists, to purchase, possess, or use acupuncture needles. See [21 U.S.C. §§ 331\(a\)–\(c\), \(g\), and \(k\)](#); [21 U.S.C. § 352\(q\)](#).

FDA has restricted the sale, distribution, and use of acupuncture needles to prescription use. See [21 CFR § 880.5580\(b\)\(1\)](#); [21 CFR § 801.109](#); see also [21 U.S.C. § 360j\(e\)\(1\)](#); [21 CFR § 807.3\(i\)](#).

In addition, in order to ensure the safe and effective use of acupuncture needles, FDA has further restricted the sale, distribution, and use of acupuncture needles “to *qualified practitioners of acupuncture* as determined by the States.” See [61 Fed.Reg. 64616 \(Dec. 6, 1996\)](#) (emphasis added). See [21 CFR § 880.5580\(b\)\(1\)](#); [21 CFR § 801.109](#); see also [21 U.S.C. § 360j\(e\)\(1\)](#); [21 CFR § 807.3\(i\)](#).

Accordingly, the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FDCA) and FDA regulations require that the label on a box of acupuncture needles bears the prescription statement “Caution: Federal law restricts this device to sale by or on the order of *qualified practitioners of acupuncture* as determined by the States.” See, for example, the label on a box of Seirin-brand acupuncture needles (emphasis added). See [21 CFR § 880.5580\(b\)\(1\)](#); [21 CFR § 801.109\(b\)\(1\)](#); see also [21 U.S.C. § 360j\(e\)\(2\)](#); [21 CFR § 807.3\(i\)](#).



The label on a box of Seirin-brand acupuncture needles bares the prescription statement “Caution: Federal law restricts this device to sale by or on the order of qualified practitioners of acupuncture as determined by the States.”

4. It is illegal for unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists, to reinsert a used acupuncture needle into an acupuncture needle insertion tube. See [29 CFR § 1910.1030\(d\)\(1\)](#); [29 CFR § 1910.1030\(d\)\(2\)\(vii\)](#); [29 CFR § 1910.1030\(d\)\(4\)\(iii\)\(A\)\(1\)](#).

It is not safe to reinsert a used acupuncture needle into an acupuncture needle insertion tube—this practice can transmit disease.

5. It is illegal for unqualified practitioners of acupuncture, such as physical therapists, to reinsert a used acupuncture needle into a patient. See [21 U.S.C. §§ 331\(a\)–\(c\), \(g\), and \(k\)](#); [21 U.S.C. § 352\(q\)](#); [29 CFR § 1910.1030\(d\)\(1\)](#); [29 CFR § 1910.1030\(d\)\(4\)\(iii\)\(A\)\(1\)](#).

It is not safe to reinsert a used acupuncture needle into a patient—this practice can transmit disease.

Pursuant to the FDCA and FDA regulations, an acupuncture needle is labeled for “single use only”: it must be used for a single patient only and a single insertion only and must be discarded immediately at the end of the surgical operation. See [21 CFR § 880.5580\(b\)\(1\)](#); [21 CFR § 801.109](#); see also [21 U.S.C. § 360j\(e\)](#); [21 CFR § 807.3\(i\)](#).

References

1. Yellow Emperor's inner classic (黃帝內經, Huang Di nei jing). China; compiled in the first century BCE.
2. [The national encyclopaedia: a dictionary of universal knowledge](#). Library ed. London: William Mackenzie; 1876.
3. Davidson T. [Chambers's twentieth century dictionary of the English language: pronouncing, explanatory, etymological, with compound phrases, technical terms in use in the arts and sciences, colloquialisms, full appendices, and copiously illustrated](#). London: W. and R. Chambers; 1903.
4. [State v. Wilson, 11 Wn.App. 916, 528 P.2d 279 \(1974\)](#).
5. American Medical Association. [Definition of surgery H-475.983](#). PolicyFinder. Modified 2013.
6. Neal E. [Introduction to Neijing classical acupuncture Part II: clinical theory](#). J Chin Med. 2013;(102):20–33.
7. Kendall DE. Dao of Chinese medicine: understanding an ancient healing art. 1st ed. New York (NY): Oxford University Press; 2002.
8. Wang JY. Robertson JD, translator, editor. [On the nature of channels](#). Lantern. 2010;7(3):4–14.
9. Schnorrenberger CC. [Anatomical roots of acupuncture and Chinese medicine](#). Schweiz Z Ganzheitsmed. 2013;25(2):110–118.
10. Melzack R, Stillwell DM, Fox EJ. [Trigger points and acupuncture points for pain: correlations and implications](#). Pain. 1977;3(1):3–23.
11. American Medical Association. [Physicians take on timely public health issues](#). AMA Wire. 2016 Jun 15.
12. Axon R. [Torin Yater-Wallace bounces back from collapsed lung with top run](#). USA Today. 2013 Dec 14.
13. Mutrie T. [Torin under pressure](#). X Games. 2014 Jan 13.
14. Adrian L. [Dry needling competencies require a minimum of specialized skills](#). Forum Magazine. 2015;30(2):1–3.
15. Kuykendall E. Complaint. 2012 Oct 22. (Internal emphasis removed.)
16. CNA, Healthcare Providers Service Organization. [Physical therapy professional liability exposure: 2016 claim report update](#). Chicago, IL: CNA Financial Corporation; 2016.