

Acupuncture isn't really into hard-and-fast rules. What works for one person may not necessarily work for another. This is the beauty of acupuncture—it meets us wherever we are. However, there are some general rules when preparing for an acupuncture appointment. All can vary based on your constitution and preferences, but these guidelines tend to improve the treatment experience and outcome for most people.

SCHEDULE WISELY.

Avoid scheduling acupuncture before or after something really strenuous. You don't need to be sedentary on either side of an appointment, but nor should you be going nuts at the gym or suffering through an extremely stressful meeting. Also avoid "sandwiching" (squeezing in acupuncture immediately between two other events), as this has a tendency to make you either late for or stressed out during your treatment.

EAT.

This is an important and frequently asked question. Everyone metabolizes food at different rates, so adjust as you see fit. A good guideline is to eat about two hours before an acupuncture appointment. You don't want to show up really full, or after having eaten something heavy, fried or spicy, but do not go for acupuncture on an empty stomach. This can leave you feeling lightheaded or physically depleted. If you're debating whether it's too close to your appointment to eat, eat. Better to be a little full than distracted by hunger during your appointment.

COFFEE IS NOT YOUR FRIEND.

That is not to say that coffee is *never* your friend. However, coffee is not your friend *immediately before acupuncture*. Try to avoid coffee for at least two hours before your appointment. Coffee is a stimulant. It has been shown to release norepinephrine and epinephrine. These two chemicals kick your body into fight-or-flight mode. Acupuncture works to shift you away from that sympathetic (fight-or-flight) state and toward a parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) one. Coffee inhibits the process. It also makes it difficult for the acupuncturist to get accurate readings on your pulse and tongue, since coffee increases your heart rate and stains your tongue.

NEITHER IS ALCOHOL.

One of acupuncture's greatest gifts is its ability to help us see more clearly. Not literally, as in improved vision (although it has been known to do that too), but it helps us see situations and our symptoms with more clarity. Alcohol does the opposite. It numbs us, takes the edge off, which during acupuncture is not a good thing. One goal of acupuncture is to bring more awareness to how we feel. Impairing the senses with alcohol is not helpful.

REMEMBER WHERE YOU'VE BEEN.

Before acupuncture, spend some time thinking about—or even making a list, if that helps—any significant medical events in your life. For example, family disease history, car accidents, broken bones, other serious injuries, long-term illnesses, surgeries, etc. Also make note of any medications you are taking currently as well as any that you took long-term in the past (e.g., birth control pills). We tend to forget these things, or assume they're irrelevant, but from an acupuncture perspective they help contribute to your overall picture of health. Your acupuncturist will want to hear about them. When in doubt about whether to include something, it's always better to mention it.

WEAR LOOSE CLOTHING.

This is so the acupuncturist can easily access the places to place needles.

DON'T RUSH.

Even when we schedule wisely, there is a tendency to leave at the last minute for appointments. This makes most appointments more stressful than they need to be - especially with acupuncture. Arriving at your appointment “charged-up” is counterproductive. It’s similar to how coffee works against the process of calming the nervous system. When you rush into an appointment, your pulse is higher than normal, your mind is spinning, and you’re tense with worry about the prospect of being late. Many of us already deal with these qualities during our regular stress-filled days—and they’re often the reasons for coming to acupuncture in the first place; why make them worse by rushing? Regardless of when your acupuncture appointment is scheduled, put it in your calendar as 15 minutes earlier. That way you leave yourself enough time.

TURN OFF YOUR CELLPHONE.

Last but not least, please turn off your phone. Not on vibrate. Turn it off. Do it before your appointment actually starts, to avoid forgetting and/or getting distracted by a call or message. This is your time and no one else’s. Make it count.

Some of these things are easy to forget.

But remembering them will insure you get
the greatest benefit from your acupuncture treatment.
Create a pre-acupuncture checklist; something you
can glance at on the day of your appointment.

Here are six ways to take care of yourself *after* an acupuncture treatment.

REST.

You don't have to literally lie down or take a nap (although, bonus if you can). By rest, I mean, go easy. Don't help your friend move into a six-floor walkup apartment. Don't babysit for your sister's colicky baby and two-month-old puppy. Don't stay up really late that night. Some people get a jolt of energy after acupuncture, but better to savor the boost—chances are, you need it. Resting allows the physical and emotional restoration that acupuncture sets in motion to continue.

GO LIGHT ON EXERCISE.

A lot of people ask whether they can exercise after acupuncture. Exercise is fine—light, gradual movement can be a nice adjunct to an acupuncture treatment—but be gentle. If you're a runner, try walking on the day you have acupuncture. If you normally take advanced yoga classes, give a beginner or intermediate class a whirl. If you've never hiked to the top of that mountain, acupuncture day probably isn't the best day to try.

USE HEAT.

One of the most common questions I get from people who are going to acupuncture for pain relief is, "Should I use heat or ice?" Heat is the answer almost every time. From an acupuncture perspective, many pain conditions are caused by stagnation. Things are not moving smoothly through the channels, causing blockages that lead to pain. Acupuncture restores flow, helping to eliminate these blockages. Looking at pain in this way, ice is counterproductive—it causes things to remain stagnant and slows down the healing process. After acupuncture, choose heat.

AVOID ALCOHOL AND COFFEE.

This is for two reasons: 1) It's important to stay hydrated after acupuncture, because it can cause toxins to be released into your system. Staying appropriately hydrated helps flush out these toxins. Since alcohol and coffee both cause *dehydrating* effects on the body, they should be avoided after acupuncture.

2) Alcohol and coffee alter your bodily awareness. One of the main goals of acupuncture is to bring greater clarity and awareness to how we really feel. Since alcohol impairs the senses, and coffee falsely heightens them, both can potentially counteract or mask the effects of acupuncture. You don't have to eliminate these things from your life, but steer clear for a day or two after acupuncture.

TURN OFF THE TV.

Acupuncture helps bring you into a place of balance, where your sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight response) is no longer in overdrive. Your mind is calmer and clearer, enjoying a respite from the over stimulating world in which we live. As soon as you click on that TV, it all comes flooding back—incessant advertising, screaming pundits, news flashes, noise and more noise. Keep the TV off and you'll extend your state of "acu-bliss".

EAT GOOD FOOD.

Acupuncture helps bring the toxins out. Don't knowingly put them back in by eating poor-quality food. Avoid processed foods and sugar. Think about food as sustenance, and eating as an opportunity to continue healing your body after acupuncture. When we conceive of food in this way, fast food and other junk become less appealing. After acupuncture, imagine the foods that would make you feel nourished and healthy, and then go enjoy them.