Acupuncture With Electrical Stimulation as a Treatment for Severe Chronic Constipation

What is the problem and what is known about it so far?
Patients with severe chronic constipation have fewer than 3 spontaneous bowel movements each week. They also have difficulty passing stool and frequently strain when doing so; feel that they cannot complete a bowel movement; or need medications, such as suppositories, to help.

Why did the researchers do this particular study?
To see if acupuncture with electrical stimulation can help patients with severe chronic constipation.

Who was studied?
Patients with severe chronic constipation that was not caused by other medical problems.

How was the study done?
Researchers recruited patients in a randomized, controlled trial. In 1 group of participants (“electroacupuncture” [EA]), an experienced acupuncturist placed thin needles into the skin at locations thought to help stimulate intestinal movements. A weak electrical charge was applied to the needles. In the other group (“sham electroacupuncture” [SA]), the acupuncturists inserted needles at other locations and the electrical probes were applied but without an electrical current. Participants received regularly scheduled EA or SA treatments for 8 weeks and were then followed for 12 more weeks. They kept diaries of how often they had bowel movements, how difficult it was to pass stool, and whether they needed to use medications for constipation.

What did the researchers find?
On average, the number of spontaneous and complete bowel movements each week increased more in the EA group than in the SA group. More participants in the EA group had an average of 3 or more spontaneous and complete bowel movements per week than those in the SA group. Overall, participants in the EA group had less straining to pass their stool. There was no difference between the groups in the number of participants using medications to help with bowel movements. Also, there did not seem to be substantial harms from EA treatments.

What were the limitations of the study?
The study involved frequent acupuncture treatments, and it is not known if this is feasible outside the highly controlled setting of a clinical trial or if less frequent treatments might be effective. Also, the trial lasted only 20 weeks. It is not known if EA is useful over a longer period.

What are the implications of the study?
Electroacupuncture might be a useful treatment for people with severe chronic constipation, and more studies in this area are needed to better understand the possible benefits and harms. 