CAM and TENS Are Effective in Opioid Tapering in High Risk Patients

Viradia, Ishan (School: Stratford Academy)

The need for an alternative method of pain control has become critical in the United States due to the opioid epidemic. The CDC has created guidelines with patient risk categories related to the dose of pain medication prescribed. Patients consuming opioids greater than 90 Morphine Milliequivalents (MME) have been identified as being at a significantly higher risk of addiction, accidental overdose, and death. State and Federal legislation, as well as insurance companies, have recently placed limits on the quantity and dose of opioids that a patient can be prescribed for chronic pain. Alternatives must be used to control pain while decreasing opioid use in high risk patients. Acupuncture, a modality of Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM), has been used for centuries around the world to treat spinal pain. It was hypothesized that CAM and TENS therapy can be used to decrease opioid use in high risk patients prescribed opioids > 90 MME. After obtaining IRB approval, 90 volunteer patients prescribed opioids for neck and low back pain, defined as high risk by CDC (> 90 MME), were randomized into 3 groups. Patients used either TENS therapy, acupuncture, or no adjunctive treatment to control pain while weaning opioids over 60 days. Findings show that both acupuncture and TENS where effective in controlling pain and decreasing opioid consumption, when compared to using no adjunctive modality. Future studies include using combined TENS - ultrasound device to augment therapy, as well as teaching patient acupressure so they may self-administer treatment.

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