

Traditional Acupuncture Improves Wellbeing in Cancer Survivors with Lymphoedema

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Introduction

Acupuncture is not usually considered as a treatment option for people with lymphoedema. It is assumed to involve needling the affected area, raising concerns about aggravating the lymphoedema or risking cellulitis. This early-stage single-arm observational study explores the following:



Key Questions

- Can traditional acupuncture improve wellbeing in cancer survivors with lymphoedema?
- What symptoms are most troublesome for these individuals?
- Is acupuncture a safe intervention for people with lymphoedema?

It was not an intention to treat the lymphoedema itself. Participants continued their usual care programme as specified by the Lymphoedema Nurse Specialist, who monitored them throughout the study.

Methods

Participants

- Breast cancer and head and neck cancer patients, with
- Mild to moderate uncomplicated lymphoedema
- Assessed and referred by the Mount Vernon Lymphoedema Service.

Treatment schedule

13 traditional acupuncture treatments were offered, comprising:

- Series 1 = 7 treatments
- Series 2 = 6 treatments (optional and decided by the participant).

Identifying symptoms

Participants set their treatment priorities. Using the *Measure Your Medical Outcome Profile (MYMOP)*, they specified and / or rated these items:

- Symptom 1
- Symptom 2 (optional)
- An Activity (optional)
- Wellbeing

They rated each item on a 7-point scale:

- 0 “as good as it could be”
- 6 “as bad as it could be”.

Measurement

MYMOPs were completed prior to the:

- 1st treatment of each Series (Treatments 1 & 8) – “**Baseline**”
- Final treatment of each Series (Treatments 7 and 13) – “**Followup**”.
- New Symptom(s) / Activity could be specified at the beginning of Series 2.

Acupuncture

Treatments were administered once weekly by two acupuncturists who are members of the British Acupuncture Council.

All treatments were individualised for each participant.

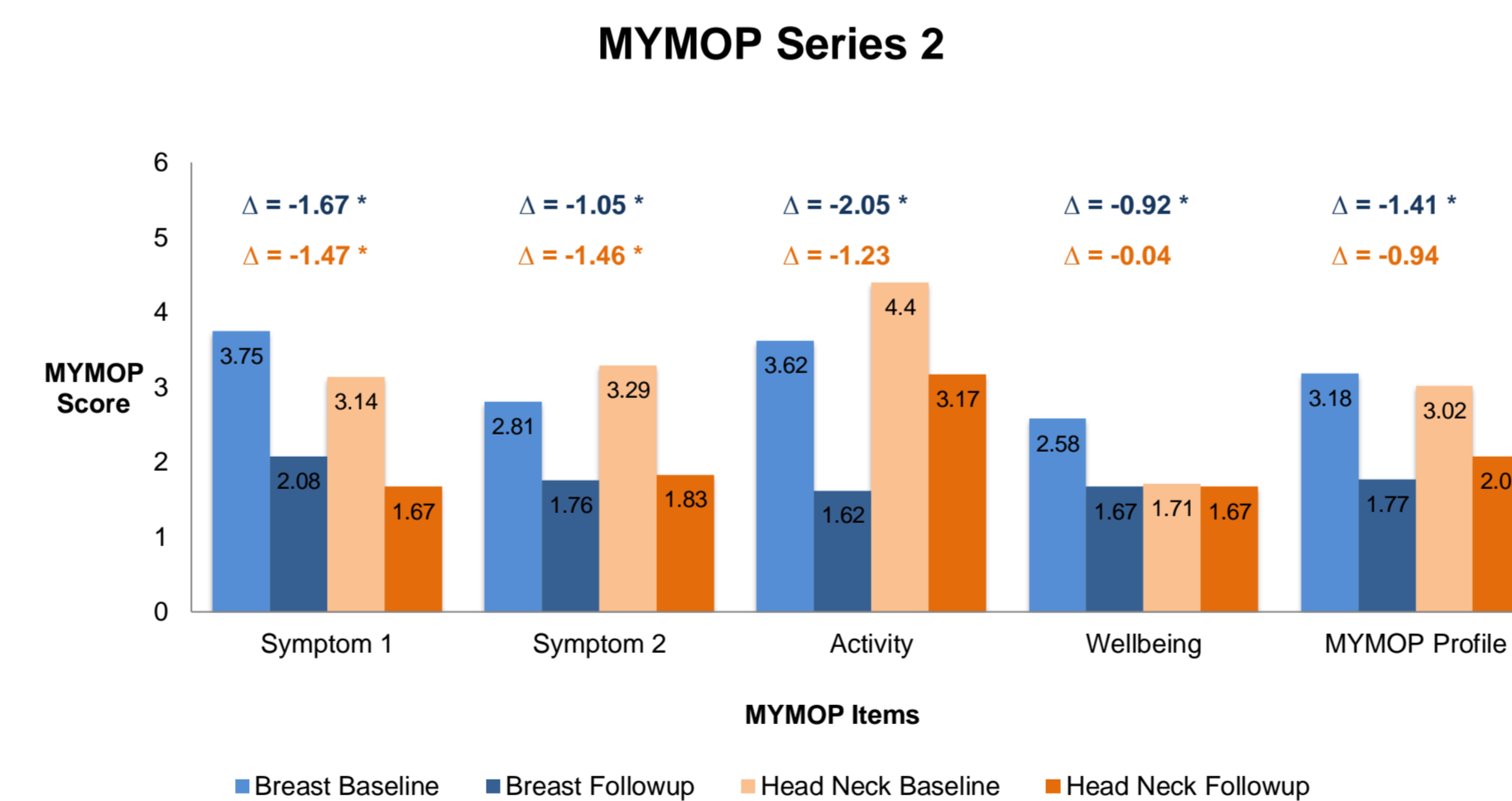
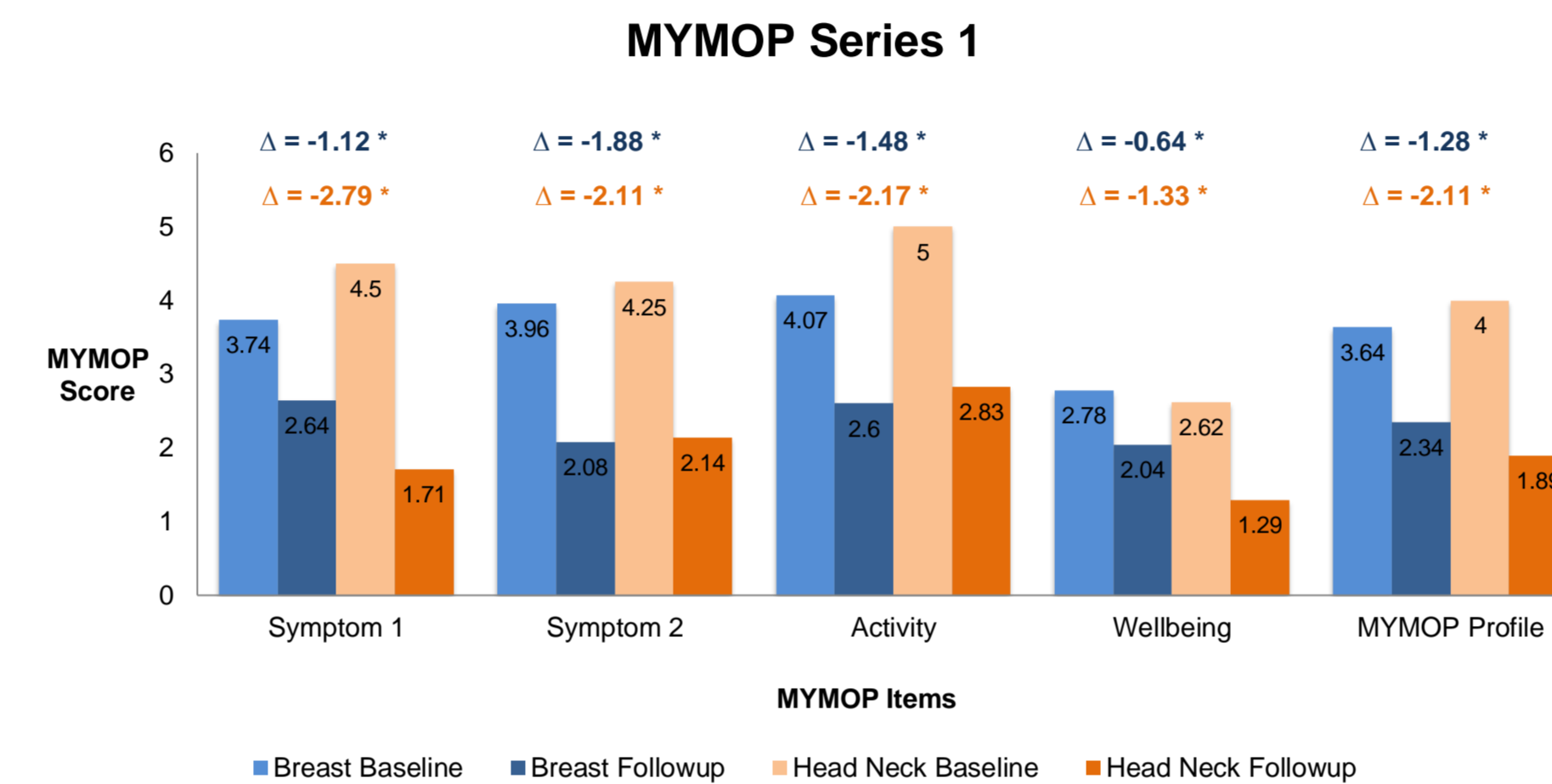
Needling was avoided in the affected area/quadrant.

Results

- 24 breast and 6 head and neck cancer patients completed Series 1 & 2
- 2 breast and 1 head and neck cancer patients completed Series 1 only
- 1 breast and 1 head and neck cancer patient were lost to the study.

Can traditional acupuncture improve wellbeing in cancer survivors with lymphoedema?

- A change of over 0.5 to 1.0 on the MYMOP Score is clinically significant
- * indicates significant results ($p < 0.05$) for paired sample ‘t’ tests
- MYMOP Profile = the average of the sum of the specified items.



What symptoms are most troublesome?

Breast cancer participants:

Specified lymphoedema-related symptoms including:

- Pain, nagging ache, dull pain, discomfort, aching, heaviness, sensations of a “bag” under the arm, inability to wear clothes
- Swelling.

Head and neck participants:

Specified a wider range of musculoskeletal symptoms, including those affecting the neck, back, jaw, shoulder, knee, legs and feet.

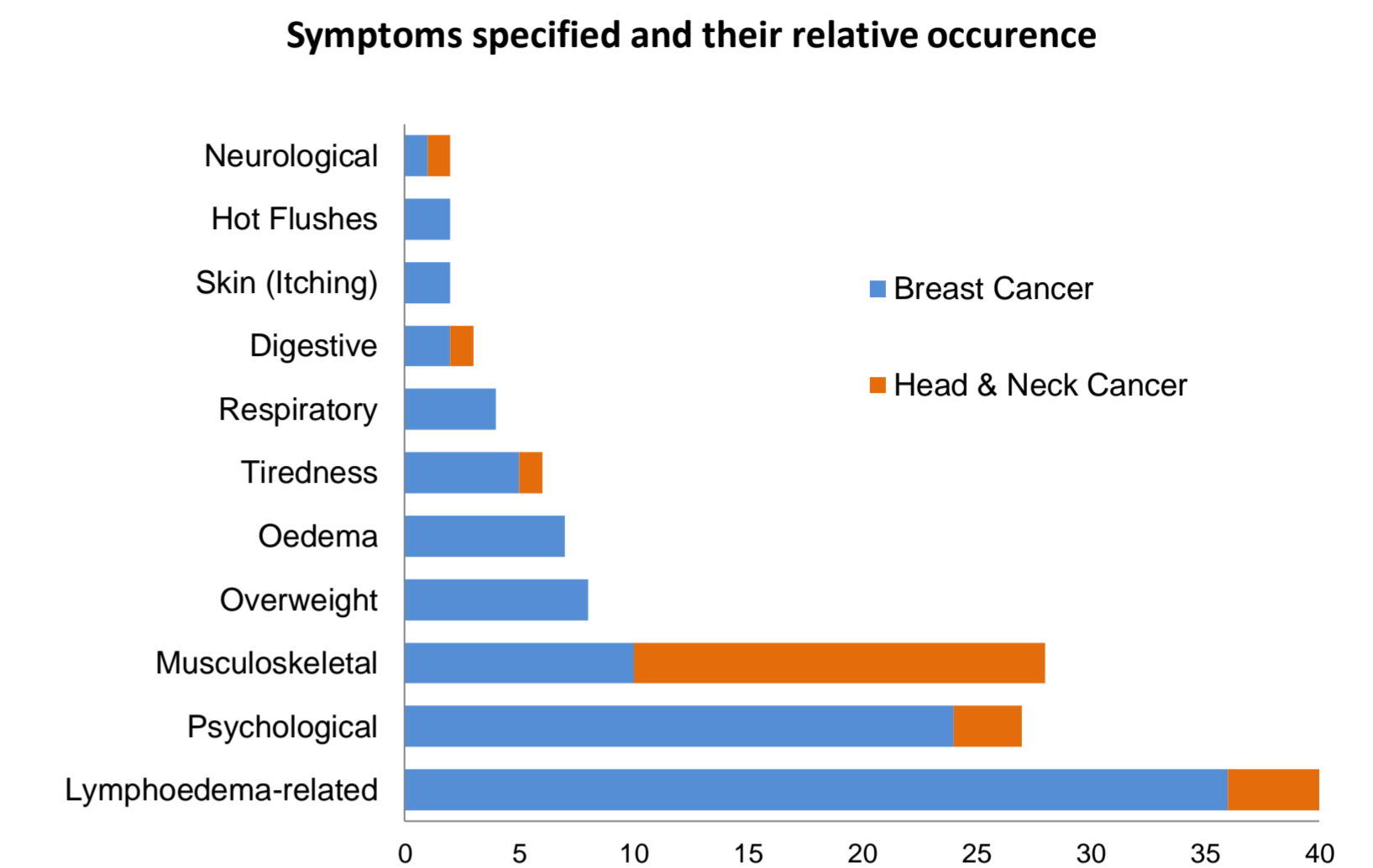
Psychological symptoms:

Both groups specified a range of psychological symptoms, including:

- Anxiety, stress, feeling depressed
- Sleep disturbance and insomnia
- Bereavement issues.

Symptoms specified by participants and their relative occurrence

- 35 MYMOPs were completed for Series 1, 31 for Series 2
- 129 symptoms were specified in total.



Is acupuncture safe for people with lymphoedema?

- No serious adverse effects were observed or reported.
- As a safety check, breast cancer participants were measured for volume at intervals throughout the study. There were no increased or decreased volumes outside of the normal range for each participant.

Additional benefits

The Lymphoedema Nurse Specialist noted improved concordance with prescribed care programmes, as well as improved self-management, in many participants.

Conclusions

- Acupuncture can significantly improve the wellbeing of cancer survivors with upper body lymphoedemas
- It addresses a range of symptoms experienced by individuals, including:
 - Lymphoedema associated problems
 - Other non-lymphoedema related problems
- Acupuncture is a safe intervention for people with lymphoedema
- Additionally, improved concordance and/or self-management were observed in many participants
- This approach is not intended to affect volume
- Further research is warranted.

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