

Magnet Therapy Gaining Public Acceptance

PAIN

Editorial Staff

Survey Finds It Third Alternative Treatment of Choice

Most studies of "alternative" care present a list of the most popular forms of care. In virtually every recent study, chiropractic is vying for the top spot, often followed by massage therapy, with herbs and vitamin supplements rounding out the leaders. However, a new national phone survey ("America Hurts") of more than 1,000 men and women conducted by Opinion Research International has magnet therapy in the number three slot. CME Health, a consumer health consulting group, analyzed the survey data and emerged with the following findings:

Pain Surgery Finds It Third Alternative Treatment of Choice			
Complaints of Frequent or Constant Pain		Causes of Pain for Women	
Back Pain	31%	Health Conditions Job Activities Household Chores	45% 23% 20%
Leg, Knee, Foot Pain	30%		
Shoulder, Arm Pain	25%		
Neck Pain and Headaches	23%		
Wrist Pain	12%		
Causes of Pain for Men		Supplemental" Treatment Use	
Job Activities	49%	Chiropractic	16%
Sports	27%	Massage Therapy	15%
Health Conditions	20%	Magnet Therapy	12%

The survey stated that magnet therapy was:

- tried by nearly 40% of arthritis sufferers;
- used by more than 33% of those with chronic sports-related or other injuries; and
- tried by 26% of those with wrist pain.

The idea of magnetic therapy to treat disease began in the early 16th century with the Swiss physician, philosopher, and alchemist Paracelsus, who used magnets to treat epilepsy, diarrhea, and hemorrhage.¹ In the late 1800s, the Sears catalogue advertised magnetic boot inserts, magnetic caps and clothing with over 700 magnets.²

Today, there are a plethora of magnet therapy websites ready and willing to sell consumers all sorts of

magnetized items: jewelry; mattresses; carpal tunnel wristbands; adjustable vests; body wraps; gloves; and pet bed pads, to name a few. These sites explain that pain/injury relief can be found by placing magnets on specific acupressure points; that the therapy increases peripheral blood flow; reduces swelling of arthritis; calms the nerves; and helps with jet lag/motion sickness. There's no question that magnets and magnetism have interesting properties and many uses, but many are skeptical of magnetic therapy.

David Ramey, DVM, in a review of the subject,³ says that it is "important to differentiate between time-varying electromagnetic machines and static low-intensity magnets which are sewn into various bandages, mattresses and pads." He notes that the USFDA has approved the use of pulsating electromagnetic therapy for the treatment of delayed and nonunion fractures. He adds that the research into the uses of these devices for pain relief or for soft tissue injuries are not approved and that studies have reaped conflicting results.

The strength of magnets is measured in Gauss units. (The "simplified" definition of Gauss is the measurement of magnetic induction of a magnetic field in which one abcoulomb of charge, moving with a component of velocity perpendicular to the field and equal to one centimeter per second, is acted on by a force of one dyne.) One website informs its buyers that "for magnets to work properly and effectively they must be at least 3,950-gauss strength," and that drug store and mail-order magnets are often no more than 800 gauss. Dr. Ramey states that there have been four recent trials on pain relief and low-intensity static magnets: two with positive results and two with negative results. The two positive studies suggested that magnets were useful in the treatment of heel pain associated with diabetic neuropathy, and in relief of trigger point pain associated with postpolio syndrome, respectively. The negative reports were for the treatment of neck and shoulder pain and treatment of foot pain. The study on neck and shoulder pain concluded that there was a strong placebo effect in the magnetic devices studied.¹

In a 1994 survey of 200 physical therapists and rheumatologists, about five percent judged magnets effective in pain relief of seven different conditions. The questions about the effectiveness of magnetic therapy are for future research, but for many people, (as evidenced by the 40% of arthritis sufferers who were willing to try magnet therapy to ease joint pain) it's much more a matter of "Why not try it? What do I have to lose?"

References

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