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Auriculotherapy Complications: Ear Stapling Gone Bad

ABSTRACT

Background: A form of acupuncture called auriculotherapy seems to be gaining popularity. The potentially dangerous practice of ear stapling for weight loss and substance abuse treatment is performed across the country and is unregulated in many states. Ear stapling consists of placing surgical staples through the ear to stimulate acupuncture pressure points to supposedly suppress appetite or cravings. The practice is largely unregulated in much of the country despite possibly devastating complications. Here we report three cases of complications from ear stapling that presented to our otolaryngology practice.

Study Design: This study presents a case series of several patients who recently presented to an otolaryngology practice with complications from ear stapling for weight loss treatment. A literature review for evidence supporting ear stapling was also performed.

Results: Ear stapling can result in potentially serious complications including chondritis, severe local allergic reactions to metal and local unsightly granulation tissue growth. An exhaustive literature search of peer-reviewed journals produced no controlled studies showing ear stapling to be effective for weight loss and no literature describing potential complications.

Conclusions: Many who perform the procedure tout ear stapling to be a safe and effective method of weight loss; however, it is somewhat invasive and has potential side effects. Patients considering or already receiving this therapy should be forewarned of the potential complications as well as the fact that there is no adequate proof that the therapy is effective.

CASE #2

•45 year old Caucasian female with a history of mild obesity despite multiple diet attempts. Patient sought help from "Staple me Thin," a local nurse that places staples for smoking cessation and weight loss. Patient had staple in place for 2 months and reported a 10 lb weight loss; however, the staples became painful and she developed unsightly granulomas around the tines of the staples. The staples were removed by the nurse who placed them.
•Patient presented to our Otolaryngology clinic for treatment of the painful and unsightly inflammatory reaction.
•Patient was treated with oral levofloxacin and topical hydrocortisone for 7 days. Patient reported slow resolution to normal.



CASE #3

•42 year old female who underwent bilateral ear stapling by a local nurse for weight loss and smoking cessation. Patient developed left auricular erythema, pain and edema so had the staple removed. She did not seek further medical care. Symptoms continued to worsen, but she continued to try alternative therapies for treating the infection. She ultimately developed left auricular chondritis and abscess.
•Patient presented to our Otolaryngology clinic after 3 weeks of symptoms.
•Patient was treated with incision and drainage of the abscess performed in clinic with bolster placement and a 10 day course of oral levofloxacin. Bolster was removed after 7 days. Patient had a full recovery and at follow up had no auricular deformity.

CASE #1

•38 year old African American female with a known allergy to nickel. Patient presented to her chiropractor inquiring about auriculotherapy for weight loss. She informed him of her allergy to nickel and was told that the staples would not cause a reaction. 48 hours after staples were placed, she developed an erythematous, itchy rash over bilateral pinna. Patient returned to her chiropractor who removed the staples and told her to visit her regular doctor for treatment.
•Patient was referred to our Otolaryngology practice with the below pruritic, edematous maculopapular rash.
•She was treated with oral prednisone and topical fluocinonide ointment, as well as otic steroid drops, with good relief of symptoms in 5-7 days.



CONCLUSION

The prevalence of obesity in the United States continues to increase. Nearly two out of three adult Americans are either overweight or obese.¹ Americans spend an estimated \$50-60 billion per year on weight loss products and services. Ear stapling is one of these potentially costly services. Many who perform the procedure tout ear stapling to be a safe and effective method of weight loss; however, it is somewhat invasive and has potential side effects.

Practitioners may not be using proper sterile techniques, nor counseling their patients sufficiently. Patients considering or already receiving this therapy should be forewarned of the potential complications as well as the fact that there are no adequate studies to demonstrate efficacy of the therapy.

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