

Relieving Piriformis Syndrome Pain: How Dry Needling and Sports Acupuncture Can Help

If you're struggling with deep buttock pain that sometimes shoots down your leg, you may have a condition called piriformis syndrome. This happens when the piriformis muscle, located deep in your glutes, irritates the nearby sciatic nerve. The result? Pain, tingling, or numbness that can mimic sciatica and make sitting, walking, or climbing stairs uncomfortable.

While physical therapy and medications are often the first steps in treatment, more people are turning to therapies like dry needling and sports acupuncture for relief. If you're curious about these options but unsure how they work or whether they're effective, this article is for you.

What Is Piriformis Syndrome?

The piriformis muscle runs from your lower spine to the top of your thighbone and helps with hip rotation. But when it becomes tight, inflamed, or spasms, it can press on the sciatic nerve that runs underneath (or sometimes through) the muscle. This nerve compression causes pain in the buttock and possibly down the leg.

It's a tricky condition to diagnose and treat. That's why many patients explore therapies beyond stretching and massage.

What Is Dry Needling?

I've discussed the differences between dry needling and sports acupuncture in previous blogs, but if this is your first time reading, here is a quick review:

Dry needling is a technique performed by trained sports acupuncturists, and other medical providers, where thin needles are inserted directly into tight muscle knots (called trigger points). The goal is to release tension, improve blood flow, and reduce pain. Similar to sports acupuncture, dry needling is based on Western medicine principles and focuses on treating specific muscle dysfunction. It's called "dry" because no medication is injected.

What Is Sports Acupuncture?

Sports acupuncture is a modern approach to traditional Chinese acupuncture, designed with athletes and active individuals in mind. It combines the holistic benefits of traditional acupuncture with a targeted focus on muscle recovery, mobility, and injury prevention. Sports acupuncture is rooted in Western medical

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science, just like dry needling. Additionally, instead of just treating symptoms, sports acupuncture also has the added benefit of using traditional Chinese medicine theory to address the entire musculoskeletal system and nervous system. Often sports acupuncture needling includes specific points along the body's nervous system pathways as well as muscles related to your pain.

How Can These Therapies Help Piriformis Syndrome?

Recent studies have shown that both dry needling and sports acupuncture can reduce pain and improve mobility in people with piriformis syndrome. Here's what the research says:

- In a 2024 study with over 350 participants, researchers found that dry needling combined with theraband exercises significantly reduced pain levels in patients with piriformis syndrome compared to those receiving traditional electrical therapy. ([Agrawal & Rajendran, 2024](#))
- Another 2023 clinical trial showed that patients who received ultrasound-guided dry needling experienced faster pain relief and improved function compared to exercise therapy alone. This is great news for people who can't commit to a full therapy program. ([Ustaoglu et al., 2023](#))
- Safety is always a concern with needling therapies. A 2024 review found that when dry needling is used by trained medical professionals, often with ultrasound assistance, it's very safe and poses minimal risk to nerves or blood vessels. ([Gallego-López et al., 2024](#))
- On the sports acupuncture side, a 2023 review protocol plans to compare different styles of acupuncture for treating piriformis syndrome. Though the final results aren't published yet, it reflects growing scientific interest in sports acupuncture's role in pain management. ([Xue et al., 2023](#))
- Another 2023 study analyzed commonly used sports acupuncture points for piriformis syndrome, giving practitioners more tools to design effective treatment plans. ([Luo et al., 2023](#))

What to Expect During Treatment

Dry Needling: You may feel a brief muscle twitch or a cramping sensation when the needle hits a trigger point. Most people describe it as uncomfortable but tolerable.

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Afterward, you might feel sore for a day or two—similar to how you'd feel after a deep massage.

Sports Acupuncture: Treatments usually involve placing needles in both the area of pain and along other parts of the body. I also use electric stimulation, sports massage, or fire cupping for added benefit. Sessions are effective, generally relaxing, and many people report decreased pain and better movement within a few treatments.

Are These Therapies Right for You?

Dry needling and sports acupuncture are especially helpful if:

- You've tried physical therapy or medications without success, or reach a plateau in your current treatment plan
- You want a more natural, drug-free approach to pain relief
- You have tight or overworked muscles from sitting, running, or sports

That said, always check with your primary care provider before starting any new treatment—especially if you have bleeding disorders, are pregnant, or have implanted medical devices.

Final Thoughts

If you're dealing with piriformis syndrome and looking for options beyond stretching and medications, dry needling and sports acupuncture offer safe and effective relief. These therapies are gaining support not only from patients, but also from recent medical research that points to their benefits.

You don't have to live with sciatic-like pain. If you have this condition, give me a call at the clinic and we can discuss how this approach can help you.

As always, feel free to reach out with any questions. I'm happy to chat more about any of the clinic updates or treatment topics.

Curated, compiled and written by Dr. Nathan J. Heide, DAOM, MBA, LAc and Rebecca Carsten to offer an insightful overview of sports acupuncture, dry needling, and medical topics in Eugene, Oregon.

Sources

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