

The NADA Protocol in Substance Abuse Treatment

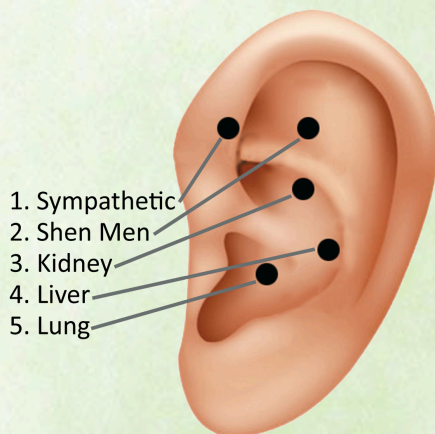
The National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) ear acupuncture protocol is a safe, effective and cost-efficient procedure that has been successfully used in addiction medicine for more than 50 years. The NADA protocol, also known as acudetox, is a simple ear acupoint stimulation technique that is a type of auriculotherapy commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine. Originally developed for acute heroin withdrawal by neurosurgeon Dr. H.L. Wen in Hong Kong in the 1970s, the NADA protocol found a home in the US at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx in the 1990s. As the evidence of its effectiveness has mounted, its use has slowly expanded to most areas of health care (Stuyt, Voyles & Bursac, 2018).

The NADA protocol is a straightforward, low-cost, nonverbal, nonthreatening intervention. It can be conducted in a group setting. Evidence shows it aids behavioral health treatments and maintains positive effects over time. Use of the NADA protocol has been shown to relieve patients' withdrawal symptoms and to improve treatment engagement and retention.

It has been shown to have an immediate calming effect on individuals, regardless of the type of substance used or the presence of a co-occurring disorder. Participants report feeling better about themselves, specifically reporting improvements in energy levels (Carter et al., 2017).

A standardized therapy, the NADA protocol uses up to 5 invariant ear acupoints. Not a replacement for other modalities, it is intended to be integrated into a comprehensive substance abuse treatment program. Nor does the NADA protocol replace the much broader range of interventions available within traditional Chinese medicine, which excels at individualized diagnosis and treatment. Because it uses specific ear acupoints that do not change, the procedure can be administered by a range of medical practitioners, even those who may not have formal acupuncture training; professionals should first check their own state laws pertaining to acupuncture licensure (Carter & Olshan-Perlmutter, 2014).

NADA Protocol 5 Ear Acupoints



The NADA protocol's 5 specific ear acupoints are Sympathetic, Shen Men, Kidney, Liver and Lung. (See diagram.)

According to the Cleveland Clinic, each acupoint represents a specific type of relief for common behavioral health symptoms:

1. The Sympathetic point helps with pain relief and to balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system.
2. Shen Men (also known as the "Spirit Gate") promotes detoxification and has a calming effect on the mind and body, including relief from anxiety, depression, insomnia, restlessness, cravings, pain and tension.
3. The Kidney point can help to ease fears.
4. The Liver point can help to reduce anger and frustration; to increase confidence and clear thinking; and to promote detoxification.
5. The Lung point can help in the release of emotions, such as grief or sadness, and in just letting go.

The NADA Protocol in Trauma-Related Treatment

The NADA protocol is a remarkably effective tool that can be applied to many populations receiving behavioral and primary health care. It is particularly valuable for patients affected by violence and trauma. Studies have shown that ear acupuncture improves overall symptoms in patients with post-traumatic stress disorder; it may also reduce the

risk of suicidal behavior (Kwon et al., 2020; Kwon & Lee, 2023). Due to its non-verbal and non-pharmaceutical nature, it is a popular option among many groups, especially among those whose culture or upbringing does not include Western-style talk therapy.

The NADA Protocol Adapted to Ear Acupressure

Stimulating the ear acupoints can be done in a variety of different ways, not only through acupuncture needle insertion. For example, using “ear seeds” is another effective acupressure technique. Typically, the ear seed is a vaccaria seed or a metal bead that is taped over the NADA-specified acupoints in the outer ear. After being taped to the skin, ear seeds are massaged to act as acupressure, activating the targeted body system to promote a healing response.

NADA points out that the NADA protocol is specific to ear acupoints and is limited for trauma recovery and healing. NADA asks anyone using the procedure to agree to this statement of ethical use:

- I understand that learning this does not make me an acupuncturist or auriculotherapist and I will not present myself in that way.
- I will not make inappropriate claims about expected outcomes.
- I offer ear acupoints as a specific and limited protocol to support, not substitute, medical and psychosocial care.
- I will not use, or withhold, this protocol punitively or for financial gain.
- I will comply with all local laws and regulations.

Resources

- National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) resource page: *Ear Acupoints for Trauma Recovery and Healing*, <https://acudetox.com/resource/ear-acupoints-for-trauma-recovery-and-healing/>
- Cleveland Clinic resource page: *Thinking About Using Ear Seeds? What You Should Know*, <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/ear-seeds>
- Acupuncture Collective Calgary instruction page: *Ear Seed Instructions*, <https://www.acupuncturecollective.ca/blog/ear-seed-instructions>
- Trauma Informed California website: <https://trauma-informed-california.org/>



How Does Ear Seed Acupressure Work?

While it is relatively simple to apply ear seeds, the Cleveland Clinic recommends starting under the supervision of a licensed acupuncturist who can demonstrate exactly where and how to place them on the NADA protocol ear acupoints. Having someone else apply the ear seeds will help to ensure that the seeds are applied in the right places and lessen the risk of a seed coming off its sticker and falling into the ear canal.

NADA protocol ear seed step-by-step instructions:

1. Clean and dry the outside of the ear with rubbing alcohol—not in the ear canal.
2. Choose from among the 5 NADA acupoints—see the reference image.
3. Use tweezers to apply the ear seed; try not to touch the sticky part of the tape.
4. Press the seed gently to ensure that it sticks.
5. For best results, apply seeds to the same acupoints on each ear.
6. Massage ear seeds by gently rubbing them in a circular motion 2–3 times a day, 1–3 minutes each time.
7. After 3–5 days, remove the seeds using tweezers.
8. Let the skin rest for a few days before re-applying new seeds.
9. Whenever feeling any discomfort after applying the seeds, remove them entirely or apply less pressure when massaging them so as not to damage the skin.

(Adapted from the Acupuncture Collective Calgary *Ear Seed Instructions* blog page)

References

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