



Practice Guidance – Preventing Pneumothorax Accidents in Acupuncture Practice

Pneumothorax accidents as a result of acupuncture practice occur. Registrants must be diligent in their efforts to minimize the risk of accidental injury to patients by using sound clinical judgement to accurately assess the patient's condition and to apply treatment accordingly. Patients must be properly informed¹ of the risks of acupuncture treatment, including the possibility of pneumothorax, prior to receiving treatment.

How does a pneumothorax in acupuncture practice occur?

Pneumothorax accidents may occur as a result of inappropriate needle depth, direction, or angle of insertion, type of manipulation technique used, or stimulation provided to points most commonly located over the chest, back and upper shoulders. Other factors such as patient position and anatomical variances due to either congenital or pathological reasons can also contribute to their occurrence.

Practice Note: Injuries to vital organs can be avoided if additional precautions are taken by the registrant when treating points near vital organs. Appendix 1 of the [Safety Handbook](#) refers to points considered to be dangerous or cautionary in acupuncture practice, and includes points that at higher risk for pneumothorax.

What are the symptoms?

Page 75 of section 4.9 of the [Safety Handbook](#) states that registrants should:

Attend to symptoms such as cough, chest pain, and difficult or laboured breath (dyspnoea) that happen immediately or gradually develop in the next few hours following treatment.

Depending on the grade of pneumothorax, symptoms can vary in intensity and severity. Despite this, all cases of suspected pneumothorax are medical emergencies.

Practice Note: A person who reports experiencing any degree of (new) shortness of breath, chest pain and/or pain/discomfort with breathing, and/or cough either during, or in the hours

¹ <https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Consent-to-Treatment.pdf>



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following acupuncture treatment, should be urgently referred to the nearest emergency department for immediate assessment.

What should be included in the informed consent?

The College's Practice Standard on [Consent to Treatment](#) clearly describes what is required of registrants when obtaining and documenting informed consent. Subsections "b" and "e" of this standard include requirements for a registrant to not only inform a patient of potential risks and benefits of the proposed assessment, treatment, or procedure, but to also discuss these areas for consent with the patient or the substitute decision-maker. When providing information, it is the responsibility of the registrant to ensure that to the best of their ability, the information provided is understood.

Practice Note: As noted in the Practice Standard on Consent to Treatment, registrants should be aware that some professional liability insurance providers may require that specific provisions be included in the consent form outlining specific health risks to a patient in advance of providing the treatment and may decline to indemnify the practitioner in the absence of such provisions. One such example for acupuncture is mentioning the risk of pneumothorax. Registrants are best advised to review the terms of their professional liability insurance policies to ensure they are in compliance.

Practical Application & Practice Scenario

Scenario 1

During the consent portion of an initial consultation for acupuncture treatment, a registrant draws the patient's attention to the informed consent document which highlights the risk of pneumothorax as part of their proposed treatment (acupuncture). The registrant explains in plain language what a pneumothorax is, which areas of the body when needled could more likely cause such an accident, and in what ways the registrant works to mitigate this risk (i.e., needle angle/depth of insertion, patient positioning and body type, and relevant medical diagnoses which may increase risk, etc.). The registrant further mentions that although they strive to mitigate risk to the best of their ability; risk can never be fully reduced to zero. The registrant then asks the patient if they have questions or concerns about this area of risk regarding acupuncture treatment, ensuring that the patient has adequate time to talk about their concerns. The patient questions if the acupuncture points the registrant intends to use as



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part of their treatment plan are located in areas that are at higher risk of causing a pneumothorax and, if so, whether there are alternative treatment options for those areas in place of acupuncture treatment.

This scenario highlights the importance of a *consent discussion* when obtaining informed consent. Without a proper discussion, important communications between the registrant and patient in the areas of risk and concern cannot be fully explored.

What should I do if something goes wrong?

According to the Standards of Practice on [Ethical Practice and Professional Accountability](#) and [Professional Duty of Candour](#), registrants have the professional responsibility and accountability to safeguard the quality of care their patients receive. Registrants are expected to take preventive as well as corrective action to protect patients from unsafe, incompetent, or unethical care.

In the event of an accident, registrants must assume responsibility and act professionally to manage the situation in the best interest of the patient, and to properly document the incident.²

The professional duty of candour requires the registrant to:

- tell the patient (or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family) when something has gone wrong;
- explain in clear and comprehensive terms to the patient (or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family) the short- and long-term effects of what has happened;
- apologise to the patient (or, where appropriate, the patient's advocate, carer or family) for the problem; and
- offer an appropriate remedy or support to address the problem and remedy it to the extent possible, including making the appropriate referrals to other health care specialists.

² <https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/resources/newsletters/summer-2022/>



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Useful links and resources:

Safety Handbook https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/media/1064/safety_program_handbook.pdf

Consent to treatment https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/media/1061/ctcma-consent_to_treatment.pdf

Practice Standard on Consent to Treatment <https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Consent-to-Treatment.pdf>

Practice Standard on Ethical Practice and Professional Accountability
<https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Practice-Standard-on-Ethical-Practice-and-Professional-Accountability.pdf>

Practice Standard on Professional Duty of Candour <https://www.ctcma.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Professional-Duty-of-Candour.pdf>