Heather Rice calls them "kitty cat whiskers" — one acupuncture needle inserted on each side of the nostrils, an acupuncture point known as Large Intestine 20.

The treatment helps alleviate symptoms of seasonal allergic rhinitis: runny nose, congestion, nasal drip, general misery, says Rice, a licensed acupuncturist at UC Irvine's Susan Samueli Center for Integrative Medicine.

"One thing I notice almost immediately is that in just 30 minutes, they say, 'Oh my God, I can actually breathe,'" Rice said. "I don't want to say it's 100 percent, but with at least 8 out of 10 people, their noses will open up. They can breathe better, and they're not as congested."

The benefits Rice has observed are confirmed in a new study, although the benefit isn't as pronounced as she has found in her day-to-day work. The paper, published this week in the journal Annals of Internal Medicine, followed 422 Germans who suffered from seasonal pollen allergies. Over the course of eight weeks, the subjects were divided into three groups and given three treatments — acupuncture, together with the antihistamine cetirizine (marketed as Zyrtec); a "sham" acupuncture, along with the drug; and the drug only.

The group that had real acupuncture with the drug reported a slight improvement in their symptoms — a boost of 0.7 points on the Rhinitis Quality of Life Questionnaire, compared with the group that got no acupuncture; and a boost of 0.5 points compared with the group that received the fake acupuncture, which involved sticking them with needles in places that aren't accepted treatment points.

"The improvements may not have been large enough to be noticeable or to make much of a difference to people," the authors said in a summary of their paper.

This brings up the big question once again about acupuncture: Does it really work, or do people just convince themselves it works? And does it matter? A large analysis of previous studies last year determined the effectiveness rate for real acupuncture was about 50 percent, and for sham acupuncture it was 43 percent.

"UCI's been studying that as well," Rice said. "They can't say it's not the placebo effect. That is an ongoing thing."

The German study also found that the improvement from acupuncture had disappeared two months after the study ended. That doesn't surprise Rice, who says further treatments are needed to keep up the therapeutic benefits.

"That's kind of how acupuncture works with those kinds of things," she said. "What I say is this: Would you rather be on antihistamines every day or come and get acupuncture once a week?"

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