

## **Alternative Therapies for Horses**

By Charlene Strickland

<http://www.equestrian.org/HorseShowOnline/Alternative%20Therapies%20for%20Horses.html>

### **Promoting Performance with Alternative Veterinary Medicine**

You've planned the season's shows, working out the details of entries, trainer, van and tack. The focal point remains your horse's performance—how will you maintain your equine athlete's mental and physical strengths?

Performance depends on wellness, and today you can choose among conventional and alternative therapies. While traditional veterinary medicine will probably be your initial choice, systems like acupuncture and chiropractic can resolve physical problems. Conventional modalities, or approaches to therapy, rely on drugs or other intervention, yet they can't succeed in every case.

For issues that challenge even conventional veterinary medicine, holistic veterinary medicine goes beyond "fix the problem" and considers the whole horse. Instead of following step-by-step, "cookbook" directions, holistic views consider the animal in context. Kimberly Henneman, DVM, Park City, UT, said, "Look at the whole animal, and consider emotional problems, stress and environment."

Just as human medicine accepts other teachings and techniques, equine practitioners also realize the benefits of alternative therapies. These methods—many the same that you may have experienced in your own medical treatments—may help your horse stay sound, healthy, energetic and content.

### **Examining Alternatives**

The range of alternative therapies includes systems of health care and various therapeutic techniques. Like conventional therapies, they treat illness or disability, with the intent of healing. Alternative therapies relieve pain and stimulate tissue repair. They also focus on balancing body systems, promoting wellness by considering how all systems are interrelated.

Henneman explained, "What acupuncture and chiropractic do is help to maintain the horse. I like to do preventive, not crisis, management."

Acupuncture is part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), recognized as a complete science of venerable origin. TCM uses acupuncture and Chinese herbs to maintain the body's balance and good health.

Acupuncture identifies points in a pattern of meridians, and the practitioner inserts thin needles at the points. William McCormick, VMD, Middleburg, VA, uses acupuncture in diagnosis. He said, "You can notice something amiss as far as balance, so that gives you a clue in the acupuncture pattern. When you treat a TCM pattern, what you try to do is change the pattern. You don't treat the disease—you treat the pattern."

The acupuncture examination requires close observation. McCormick emphasized the value of assessing the horse's condition. "With acupuncture, you have to make your own diagnosis. It's what you can determine in your pulse palpation, the history, your observations and hearing and smelling the horse. The physical examination is probably the most important thing any veterinarian learns, and it's the hardest to teach," said McCormick.

The therapeutic system of chiropractic also relies on observation. The practitioner manipulates body structures through chiropractic adjustments. The goal is to improve flexibility in the horse's spine and joints.

Jim Ennis, DC, Clinton, AR, treats subluxation, which he defines as "a change in the proper movement of the joint. It refers primarily to a dysfunction of the normal movement in that joint. As a result of subluxation, the horse can lose flexibility, and the stiffness can lead to further resistance and decrease in the performance."

The chiropractor adjusts joints in the spine. "I feel for a lack of spring or resiliency in the joints that I palpate," said Ennis. "I want to push into that joint in a specific direction. The areas I concentrate on are those with a lack of spring."

Henneman said, "In chiropractic, you do a lot of joint palpation to identify which have lost the range of motion. With acupuncture, the channels and points are identified so they will be active if there's a problem. You look for those."

Massage therapy, sometime called "bodywork," also addresses soreness. Massage manipulates the muscles, not the joints.

"A horse who feels good will work better," said Colorado massage therapist Joanna Reiver. "A horse who's not tight and sore works more efficiently and is happier in his work."

The system of homeopathy treats disease, using medicines diluted from natural substances. Those who practice veterinary homeopathy often combine it with acupuncture and chiropractic.

Henneman uses TCM, chiropractic, herbs, and homeopathy. She said, "The beauty of alternative therapies is that TCM has tools and techniques, along with homeopathy, to recognize patterns of lameness at earlier levels. I

examine with the traditional Chinese tools, the acupuncture points and patterns from a homeopathic perspective.”

In aromatherapy, fragrant substances affect mood and promote wellness. Nutrition itself supports the horse’s health, with holistic advocates recommending natural substances, including herbs. Feeding fewer synthetic compounds—food instead of additives—can aid assimilation and reduce irritation to the digestive tract.

Other recently developed physical therapies involve appliances. To treat pain in soft tissues and bone problems, an equine physical therapist may use magnetic therapy, photon therapy (also called laser therapy), electrical stimulation, or ultrasound. Some veterinarians question how these devices improve healing, seeking scientific evidence through controlled studies.

The body can heal itself without interventions, and successful therapy varies on individual cases. McCormick noted that alternative veterinary medicine does apply in some situations and not in others. “Be open-minded, but don’t expect miracles,” he advised.

### **Show Horse Benefits**

[Alternative therapies can help relieve pain in the show horse. These methods help practitioners identify and treat performance problems that are subtle or chronic.](#)

David Miller, DVM, Akron, OH, said, “Acupuncture has been very helpful in diagnosing very subtle lamenesses, such as a lesion or abscess. It helps finding subtle lameness by sensitivity in the local points and other predictable points that are sensitive when a horse has specific problems.”

Certain performance problems can indicate chronic conditions that can be treated with alternative therapies. A horse that refuses to take a lead or resists bending in one direction could be compensating for a slight but persistent lameness. Over fences, indications could be consistently jumping at an angle, twisting, or changing leads. One problem area can be the result of pain somewhere else.

Michael Foss, DVM, White Salmon, WA, works with endurance horses. He said, “I may work on a horse for lameness that is almost better, but something’s missing. I look at these as complementary therapies. If you get the lameness in a foot figured out, then you fix the rest of the body with acupuncture or chiropractic. The performance horse has multiple aches and pains. We usually find the most obvious ones.”

Miller noted how conventional medicine and acupuncture complement one another. “Using acupuncture along with traditional treatment helps relieve a

lot of the compensatory soreness. When the owner has a horse close to a race or a show and needs some pain relief, acupuncture will do that.”

Madalyn Ward, DVM, Austin, TX, uses TCM along with chiropractic and homeopathy. She often combines chiropractic and acupuncture, saying, “They are very synergistic. I generally start with a chiropractic adjustment. If I feel that it hasn’t completely cleared the horse, then I will come in with the acupuncture.”

In some cases, she uses acupuncture with heat and herbs. She explained, “With an arthritic horse that’s worse in the morning after a cold night, the herb ‘moxa,’ *Artemisia vulgaris*, may be burned on or close to the needle to transmit heat to the acupuncture point.” This TCM therapy, called moxibustion, warms the acupuncture point.

Henneman said, “Chiropractic and acupuncture set a level to allow an animal to be conditioned. This not only helps the overall immune system and sense of well-being because of endorphins, but it helps to keep the horse physically symmetrical.”

The chiropractor looks for how the horse communicates a loss of flexion. Ennis explained how a horse tries to please the rider and also perform comfortably. “Stiffness can lead to further resistance and decrease in the performance. In jumping, the rear end won’t be straight over the shoulders. He twists, because he’s jumping while he’s hurting.”

As one cause, Ennis cites incorrect saddle and rider position: “I find a lot of problems that are rider-induced, either as a result of poor saddle fit, poor saddle positioning too far forward or an unbalanced rider,” said Ennis.

He added that mounting can stress the withers. If you pull yourself up into the saddle, you cause your horse discomfort.

A horse that pulls back can injure the poll, affecting the horse’s lateral flexion of the neck. “I see that a lot when people describe if the horse is on the left lead, but the nose is turned to the outside,” said Ennis. “That usually indicates a poll problem. I try to adjust the whole horse, but that keys me into certain areas.”

Ennis also recommended allowing regular turnout, so the horse can roll at leisure. He compares this exercise to waking up and stretching. “If the horse is given the opportunity, he will self-adjust about 80 percent of the subluxations he has. Those fixations can build up, so he can’t self-correct himself. That opportunity on a regular basis dramatically reduces the amount of problems he will have.”

Alternative therapies can be separate from or combined with conventional therapies. McCormick first diagnoses lameness before deciding to treat with

acupuncture. He uses acupuncture when he judges a fair chance of response, and finds it helpful in treating older horses or hard-to-define problems. He said, "Diseases with a good Western description or approach may not be the ones on which you'd automatically use acupuncture...For the horses that are sore, if not lame, a lot of them can be helped quite a bit without drugs."

Miller noted that for a diagnosed hock problem, he may use injections and acupuncture together. "If I find sensitivity, I explain that and confirm with a conventional examination. I will do treatment based on my acupunctural findings. I use them in conjunction and in some cases, concurrently. You get relief from compensatory problems faster."

As an example, he cited a back problem traced to hocks. He finds that the horse can perform better in less time with a hock injection and acupuncture, rather than the injection alone and then stall rest.

Treating a show horse with alternative therapies can reduce the use of conventional drugs and their side effects. "Show horses have lumps and bumps and sore muscles," said McCormick. "You can see the anticipation of problems. You can probably reduce your drug use if you increase your acupuncture or chiropractic."

Henneman, an eventer herself, treats horses competing in many disciplines. She is careful to recommend products that do not contain forbidden substances.

She said, "With alternative medicine, you can keep a horse going in stressful periods without using medications with long-term effects. Instead of bute or Banamine, you can use herbs. It relies on the client, the tool, and the horse." She uses homeopathic remedies and noted that herbal treatments have been developed for the British market, due to restrictions on Butazolidin in England. She advised to choose herbal remedies with care, as active ingredients can vary in compounds.

Miller also cautioned about herbs, saying, "I don't like to feed those to performance horses that will be drug tested. The drug can metabolize to something else in the plant. It can vary batch to batch."

Aromatherapy is an option considered safe as far as testing. "A lot of my clients use aromatherapy, for a horse that needs to be calmed in the show ring," said Henneman. She noted how an Arabian rider mixed lavender oil with the facial oil on her horse, and the pleasant scent even seemed to calm the judge during the lineup.

You can also prevent or relieve stress by reevaluating management. Ward focuses on holistic medicine in her practice. She said, "For a chronic condition, I feel that taking the holistic approach, you look deeply for what

sets this process up. Look at other modalities like nutrition and bringing the body back up to balance. Drugs take the body more out of balance."

She advised treating a horse in a calm setting rather than at the high-pressure environment of a show. "It's not a good atmosphere for healing. The work I do is pretty deep, and then I like for the horse to have a day off."

### **Management To Promote Wellness**

How do you integrate alternative therapies into your horse care? First, observe your horse closely to recognize subtle differences in his performance. Remember the advice of "First do no harm," and consult with your practitioner about any therapies you perform, or therapists you engage.

Overall, veterinarians are more open-minded about accepting alternative medicine, either learning these methods themselves or involving therapists. The profession views alternative therapy as an adjunct to conventional medicine. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) recognizes alternative therapies and has issued guidelines for therapeutic options. AAEP guidelines specify the practitioner's direction of such options. This association has funded research in acupuncture and includes sessions at its annual convention.

For your veterinary care, you can choose an equine practitioner who practices only alternative veterinary medicine, with referrals to conventional practitioners. Or, consult your current practitioner for referrals on alternative therapies. Those who practice these therapies should be certified by recognized organizations (see sidebar).

Using alternative veterinary medicine, you can help your horse handle the stresses of competition. The U.S. endurance horses at the 1998 World Championships in Dubai profited from alternative treatments, as described by Foss, the team veterinarian. He said, "I felt it took the team of people we had—two veterinarians, a massage person, a farrier, chiropractor, acupuncture, laboratory analysis, x-ray, ultrasound—it took the whole gamut to get our horses ready to go. It wouldn't have had the success if we didn't have all those modalities available to us."