

Acupuncture: When Is This Alternative Medicine Practice Right for Your Horse?

When you think of acupuncture, you probably think of needles and pain. You may even be a bit skeptical about the practice and its effectiveness. However, there may be a place for acupuncture in your horse's health protocol.

We asked Megan Green, DVM, Manager, Equine Large Animal Veterinary Services, Merial, and a Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist some questions about acupuncture and when it might be considered appropriate.

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is one of the four branches of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine; the others are herbal medicine, food therapy and tui-na, a form of massage. With its roots in ancient Chinese medicine dating back more than two millennia, acupuncture is based on the theory that all the systems and their functions in the body are connected. Acupuncture is the stimulation of specific points on the body, usually using extremely thin needles to alleviate or reduce pain.

How does acupuncture work?

Acupuncture affects the body and its functions by focusing on Qi (pronounced chee). Qi is the life force or vital energy, of which there are two opposite forms: Yin and Yang. If the body is functioning properly, Qi flows freely, through what are called channels or meridians, keeping Yin and Yang in balance. If, however, a virus or bacteria interrupt the flow, the balance will disappear and disease may occur.

What are the different types of acupuncture? Do they all use needles?

The following are the most commonly used forms of acupuncture in equine medicine:

- **Simple needling:** The insertion and occasional turning of fine-gauge, metal needles into pressure points.
- **Electroacupuncture:** After the needles are inserted, they are connected to a stimulator that delivers electrical impulses to the points.
- **Moxibustion:** A hot, rolled herb is placed above the acupuncture point, withdrawn and then placed there again, with the cycle repeating itself 15 – 20 times. This method can also be used to heat an already inserted needle.
- **Point injection:** A liquid is injected into the acupuncture point.

- **Laser stimulation:** Stimulation of the acupuncture points with painless beams of a laser light.

How do I know if this is the right treatment for my horse?

Acupuncture is used as a complementary treatment to traditional veterinary medicine. Your veterinarian can make recommendations about when it might be appropriate and who is qualified to do the treatment. In clinical trials, acupuncture therapy has been shown to be effective when treating the following:

- **Chronic conditions:** heaves, asthma, cough and Cushing's disease, hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, renal failure and skin problems.
- **Gastrointestinal disorders:** diarrhea, colic, vomiting and constipation.
- **Musculoskeletal problems:** osteoarthritis and degenerative joint disease.
- **Neurological disorders:** facial paralysis and seizures.

Are there times when you shouldn't do acupuncture?

Your veterinarian will help manage your horse's care, but you would not use acupuncture in cases of infectious diseases, wounds, pregnancy or broken bones.

Will it hurt my horse?

If it's done properly, by a certified professional, acupuncture should not hurt.

How much does it cost?

Just as the cost of traditional veterinary care varies from practitioner to practitioner, the cost of an acupuncture session varies anywhere from \$40 to \$200.

How long does a treatment last?

Sessions can take 20 minutes to one hour. It is likely your veterinarian will recommend more than one session to achieve optimal results.

Who is qualified to perform acupuncture?

Only licensed veterinarians are qualified to perform acupuncture. Horse owners can check to see if a veterinarian is a Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist at www.tcv.com.

Meg Green, DVM, is a member of the Merial Veterinary Professional Services Team. Dr. Green is certified in Equine Acupuncture and has an interest in Equine internal medicine. She has expertise in ambulatory medicine working with broodmares, foals, performance horses and racehorses. Dr. Green has practiced in Alabama and Kentucky,

and continues to practice in Georgia and Tennessee when time allows. Dr. Green earned her doctor of veterinary medicine degree from Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine.

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