

Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM)

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What is acupuncture:

Acupuncture is the treatment of conditions by the insertion of very fine needles into specific points located on the body to illicit a response. In acupuncture the treatment points are chosen from the appropriate Constitutional Points. This is not the same as dry needling, where the Individual Constitution, and 5 Element Theory is not applied.

Acupuncture has been used to treat various medical conditions in humans and animals for thousands of years. The ancient Chinese discovered and described hundreds of acupuncture points in humans and animals. The specific points are thought to be connected with each other and various internal organs via meridians or channels according to the ancient scholars.

What is an acupoint

Acupoints are located in areas where there is a high density of free nerve endings, mast cells, small arteries and lymphatic vessels. Stimulation causes the release of beta-endorphins, serotonin and other neurotransmitters and can produce local, distal and/or systemic effects.

These points can also be stimulated with other techniques. More commonly used ones are:

- Moxibustion: The crushed dried leaves of a Chinese herb is rolled into a cigar-shape, burned and placed over an acupoint without touching the skin. The warming action causes stimulation of the acupoint.
- Acupressure: Hands and fingers are used to apply direct pressure to an acupoint.
- Hemo-acupuncture: A normal hypodermic needle is inserted into a blood vessel that contains an acupoint to draw a few drops of blood. Or blood from the animal is drawn and injected into the acupoint for stimulation.
- Electro-acupuncture: Electrical leads are attached to acupuncture needles and connected to an electro-acupuncture machine which is used to control the frequency and amplitude applied to each point. This allows for more effective stimulation and longer lasting effects.

- Aqua-acupuncture: The most commonly injected substances are sterile water, saline, or vitamin B12, in order to provide stimulation of the acupoint. Some needle shy horses will tolerate this better than constant stimulation with an acupuncture needle.

What physiological effects are induced by acupuncture?

- pain relief
- promotion of microcirculation
- regulation of gastrointestinal motility
- hormone and reproductive regulation
- immuno-regulation
- reducing fever/heat

When is acupuncture indicated?

Acupuncture therapy can be very effective in the following conditions in horses:

- Musculoskeletal problems: muscle soreness, back and sacro- iliac pain, neck pain, osteoarthritis, degenerative joint disease, obscure lameness, laminitis, navicular disease, sport-related injuries including tendons and ligaments.
- Gastrointestinal disorders: diarrhoea, impaction, chronic colic, gastric ulceration.
- Neurological disorders: seizure, laryngeal hemiplegia/roarers, facial and radial nerve paresis/paralysis.
- Other chronic/internal conditions: Heaves (COPD, RAO, asthma), anhidrosis, uveitis, behavioral problems, Cushing's disease, hypo- or hyperthyroidism, infertility, renal failure, geriatric weakness, skin problems, performance enhancement and prevention of disease.

The use of acupuncture for pain relief is well supported by modern research studies. However, the effects of acupuncture on internal organs and on balancing the body as a whole are less understood and more research is necessary to fully explain this ancient therapy.

How many treatments are needed and how long is a session?

The number of treatments depends on the nature, severity and duration of the disease. A single treatment may be enough for a very acute condition but generally 3 – 5 treatments are necessary to obtain results for chronic conditions. Some animals may need to be treated at regular intervals and individual horses respond differently, so what helps one horse may not work as well on another.

How safe is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a safe medical procedure when performed by a qualified veterinarian with very few negative side effects.

Conditions where acupuncture should not be used include:

- Fracture
- Infectious conditions
- Open wounds
- Pregnancy
- Directly over or into tumours or masses



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It is important to remember that acupuncture should not be used as a replacement for conventional veterinary medicine and should always be performed with a proper diagnosis.