VETERINARY ACUPUNCTURE

Shana Buchanan, DVM, MBA, CVA

Acupuncture is one of a variety of therapies that your veterinarian may use to treat your horse. Simply stated, acupuncture (acus, needle; punctura, puncture) is the stimulation of specific points on the body that have the ability to alter various biochemical and physiologic conditions to achieve the desired effect. It is a means of helping the body heal itself. Acupuncture has been used successfully for nearly 4000 years on animals, as well as human beings. As a matter of fact, it is still the treatment of choice for one quarter of the world’s population for many problems. It is now being utilized by an increasing number of veterinarians, alongside Western medicine, for various disease conditions. It is not a panacea, or cure-all, but in certain disease conditions it works well.

What conditions respond to acupuncture?
Acupuncture bridges a gap between medicine and surgery. In the Western world acupuncture is used primarily when medications are not working, are contraindicated because of possible side effects, or when surgery is not feasible. In China, it is often used as the primary treatment before conventional medicines and surgery.

In small animals, including exotics, and large animals, primarily equines, acupuncture is most commonly used for: musculoskeletal problems (e.g. arthritis), skin problems, nervous disorders, reproductive disorders, respiratory problems, poor immunity and internal medicine problems such as heart (cardiac) and kidney (renal) disease, etc.

How does it work?
Acupuncture is now known to affect all major physiologic systems. It works primarily via the central nervous system, affecting the musculoskeletal, hormonal, and cardiovascular systems. However, acupuncture does more than just relieve pain. Acupuncture also increases circulation, causes a release of many neurotransmitters and neurohormones (some of which are endorphins, the “natural pain-killing” hormones), relieves muscle spasms, stimulates nerves, and stimulates the body’s defense system, among many other beneficial effects. The particular method in which it works depends on the conditions being treated and the points used. Usually more than one mechanism of action is involved when each individual acupuncture point is ‘needled’.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine theory, disease is an imbalance of energy in the body. Acupuncture therapy is based on balancing the energy, correcting the flow of energy, and thereby healing your horse.

Is it painful? How will my horse react?
Acupuncture is often performed with sterilized thin, filamentous stainless steel needles. Occasionally your horse will experience a brief moment of sensitivity as the needle penetrates the skin in certain sensitive areas. Once the needles are in place, most horses relax, often falling asleep during treatment. For some nervous horses, it may take several treatments before they feel comfortable enough with your veterinarian to fully relax.
Is it safe?
Acupuncture is one of the safest therapies available if practiced by a competent acupuncturist. Side effects are rare. Occasionally an animal’s condition may deteriorate temporarily before positive results can be seen. However, if the body’s own system of healing is allowed to work and no chemicals are administered, complications rarely, if ever, develop. If your horse is extremely weak due to advanced disease, your veterinarian may choose only a small number of acupuncture points in the beginning and gradually increase the number of points, if needed, as your horse improves and gains strength.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of acupuncture?
Acupuncture is a natural form of treatment that enlists your horse’s inflammatory and healing mechanisms to maintain homeostasis and manage disease processes. Unlike with some pharmaceutical treatments, there is no masking of a serious problem. Acupuncture techniques can be used for diagnosis as well as treatment.

The main disadvantage of acupuncture is the owner’s misunderstanding of what to expect from its use: the belief that the horse will miraculously improve, that all conditions can be treated with acupuncture, and that the animal will only need one treatment when several treatments are usually necessary to achieve (and sometimes maintain) the desired result. Other potential disadvantages include the chance that the horse will overuse an injured limb (because of decreased pain as a result of the acupuncture) resulting in a more serious injury and misapplication of acupuncture needles can result in eye injuries, pneumothorax, infectious arthritis, and broken needles.

The chances of these negative effects occurring in clinical practice are extremely remote. They are included here for the sake of completeness and to impress upon the horse owner that no treatment modality is completely risk free.

How often and for how long will your veterinarian treat your horse?
Treatments may last from 10 seconds to 30 minutes depending on the condition treated and the method used. There are many ways of stimulating acupuncture points, including needles, electroacupuncture, aquapuncture (injecting a solution into the point), moxibustion (heating the point), and laser acupuncture. Horses may be treated as frequently as one to three times a week (depending again upon the condition treated), but typically are treated once weekly for four to six weeks. After the initial treatment period, the intervals between acupuncture treatments are then extended based upon your horse’s response to treatment and what is needed to maintain improvement. Most horses are seen once every two to six months for continued maintenance therapy, although there are some horses who no longer need acupuncture therapy once their condition has resolved.
Acupuncture is not a “one-time fix”, nor is it a cure-all. Some disease conditions will not respond to acupuncture; just as there are some diseases that do not respond well to conventional Western medicine. It is not uncommon for owners to observe improvement in their horse’s condition after the first acupuncture treatment; however, three to four acupuncture treatments must be completed before accurately assessing the effectiveness of treatment. Depending upon the severity of the disease, some horses may not show any signs of improvement until the sixth or eighth treatment. Just as in Western medicine, the earlier that your horse’s disease is diagnosed and treated, the quicker and better the response to treatment.

*If I choose acupuncture as a form of treatment for my horse, does that mean that I will not need any medications?*

The nature and purpose of the disease condition, recommended procedures, possible alternative methods of treatment, risks involved and possibility of complications will be fully explained prior to beginning acupuncture treatment on your horse.

Traditional Chinese Medicine is not exclusive of Western Medicine. For some diseases, using a combination of western medicine (drugs and/or surgery), Chinese herbal medicine, dietary changes and acupuncture therapy will achieve a much better outcome than when only one of these modalities is used.

*What does my veterinarian need to know about my horse?*

Before acupuncture treatment is performed on your horse, your veterinarian will perform a comprehensive physical medical and acupuncture examination. During this time it is important for you to inform your veterinarian with pertinent husbandry details such as:

- A complete dietary history: regular food, amount consumed, any people food, treats, etc
- Usual activity level and accommodations during the daytime and night time
- A complete medical history of allergies, major surgeries, illnesses requiring hospitalization, traumatic incidents, etc
- If your horse has, or has had cancer, let the veterinarian know this BEFORE treatment is begun. There is a concern that improving the blood flow and flow of energy in the body may help the cancer grow instead of reducing it. Whether or not to treat your horse with acupuncture when it has or has had cancer needs to be a decision made by you and your veterinarian. However, acupuncture has been used to help with the nausea and diarrhea that usually occurs when horses are treated with radiation and chemotherapy.

It is also important for you to let your veterinarian know about any physical changes that occur in your horse’s health *during and after* all acupuncture treatments.

Please feel free to discuss any questions or concerns that you may have with your veterinarian at any time.