

Acupuncture

Acupuncture, perhaps the best-known Chinese medical technique, is not limited to humans.

By Cesaltine Gregorio

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Acupuncture, perhaps the best-known Chinese medical technique, is not limited to humans — it is also being practiced on horses. Acupuncture is the insertion of needles in specific points (also called "acupoints") on the body to reestablish the subject's energy by balancing the body's yin and yang forces.

"By treating specific points, acupuncture essentially stimulates various nerves and relieves free circulation," says Allen Schoen, D.V.M., director of the Veterinary Institute for Therapeutic Alternatives in Connecticut. "Acupuncture is one modality that can be extremely beneficial. It has its limitations, but when used appropriately, it is a wonderful approach to help horses heal," Dr. Schoen says. "Acupuncture can address arthritis, paralysis, diarrhea, allergies, Lyme disease, muscle pains and many other ailments."

"There are few side effects because it is a noninvasive alternative and the worst that could happen is that the treatment does not succeed," says Dr. Richard Joseph, a staff neurologist at the Elmer and Mamdouha Hospital of the Animal Medical Center in New York City.

If conventional medicine is indicated but the animal has some reaction to aspirin or steroids, acupuncture is a healthy option to avoid a drug's side effects, Dr. Joseph adds.

One reason acupuncture is successful is that the animals' discomforts are relieved and they associate the treatments with feeling better. But while aspirin or antibiotics may be hard to administer, inserting needles for a period of time on a horse's body presents a challenge as well.

There are several techniques using traditional needles or a technique known as aqua acupuncture, Dr. Schoen explains. In the latter, a needle is used to inject an aqueous solution at a specific acupoint. A popular solution is a suspension of B-12. The needle can then be withdrawn, but the effect is close to that of the traditional acupuncture needle. "This prevents the needles from breaking inside the horse," Dr. Schoen says, because the needle is not left in the horse.

While acupuncture has been recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), there is a lot of anecdotal evidence but no scientific studies to validate the benefits of acupuncture on horses.