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## ACUPUNCTURE FAQs

### **What is acupuncture?**

According to several highly acclaimed acupuncturists, equine acupuncture has been practiced since 2000-3000 BC in China, and is currently used by  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the population. It involves the use of thin needles to stimulate specific points on the body to alter various biomechanical, physiological, and chemical conditions until an appropriate response is achieved. Acupuncture provides the body with the opportunity to heal itself, however it is important that it is used in conjunction with traditional western veterinary medical techniques when necessary. It is extremely beneficial when used as part of an all-encompassing health care program. It is often utilized for maintenance of high-level performance horses, when other treatments options aren't possible, and to avoid bad side effects/reactions of some medications such as NSAIDS (anti-inflammatories such as Bute or Banamine) or corticosteroids. It is also a therapy that can be utilized by showing horses and those in recognized and FEI sanctioned competitions.

Acupuncture is a powerful physiotherapy in which the central nervous system is activated, thus influencing the different body systems. Acupuncture impacts the physiological states of the nervous, musculoskeletal, gastrointestinal, urogenital, respiratory, reproductive, and endocrine systems. It has analgesic, anti-inflammatory, immunostimulant, and immunosuppressant effects. It also has effects on smooth and striated muscle, as well as influences on microcirculation and glandular secretions. Acupuncture stimulates the body rebalance and to do what it does naturally. Acupuncture has been shown to have some effect on peripheral nerve damage. It is ineffective with severe or irreversible pathological changes such as chronic organ damage, fractures, and cartilage degeneration and it is not recommended for treating neoplastic or severe infectious disease processes.

### **Is acupuncture a recognized diagnostic tool and treatment technique?**

Yes. Both the American Association of Equine Practitioners and the American Veterinary Medical Association recognize acupuncture as a "valid modality" and state "its technique should be regarded as a surgical and/or medical procedure". Acupuncture can be abused and therefore should only be performed by a licensed veterinarian.

Acupuncture can be used for a wide variety of veterinary conditions, however it isn't always the right solution and more times than not, it is appropriate to use acupuncture in conjunction with traditional veterinary medicine in order to provide your horse with the best medical solutions.

### **What makes acupuncture so unique?**

The nervous system is the primary control center of the entire body- organ systems, musculoskeletal system, and pain modulation. Acupuncture predominately works by engaging the nervous system. Acupuncture is also used as a diagnostic tool, just like a lameness examination. When used routinely, it can provide insight to problems before they become serious.

Acupuncture is a safe and versatile technique that offers a good alternative or adjunct therapy to traditional western veterinary medicine. It cannot cure every condition but it has given many a second chance.

### **What are examples of conditions acupuncture can be used for?**

Not all conditions respond to acupuncture. It is important for your horse to be assessed by a veterinarian prior to starting treatment and often times it will be utilized in conjunction with or to augment traditional medical techniques. Occasionally it has been effective when conventional techniques have produced less than satisfying results.

Acupuncture is effective for treating a wide variety of equine conditions, especially those where pain, inflammation, muscle spasms, disruption of nerve function, or arthritis are involved.

Examples of conditions where acupuncture may be beneficial:

- Musculoskeletal pain or fatigue
  - o Routine athlete maintenance
  - o Pre/post showing pain relief
  - o Includes shortened stride, cross-firing, inability to pick up proper lead, difficulty doing a movement/job they were previously able to perform, unwillingness to go forward, refusing jumps, spooking
- Muscle atrophy
- Back or Neck pain/Spinal issues: Saddle fit, Lumbar and Sacroiliac pain, Cervical pain
- Lameness, Osteoarthritis, Hind end weakness
- Stifle/Hock/Carpal/Shoulder pain or lameness- Acupuncture is very effective at extending the time frame between joint injections and reducing the amount of injections needed.
- Navicular Syndrome
- Laminitis
- Heaves/RAO, EIPH, Sinusitis, Pharyngitis
- Reproductive issues, Management of the cycling "Mare", Infertility
- Gas colic, Impactions, Gastric Ulcers, Diarrhea, Recurrent colic symptoms
- Neurologic Conditions
- Nerve paralysis (Radial, Facial)- acupuncture is the only modality that can stimulate a nerve directly. This is extremely important in cases of nerve paralysis.
- Trauma
- Immune Conditions
- Dermatological issues, Hives, "non-sweating" horses
- Behavioral Issues, Anxiety

### **Can acupuncture be useful for back pain issues?**

Back pain issues can be complex as studies show that the majority of horses exhibiting back pain have lower limb lameness. It is important to determine what occurring first; back pain presenting as lameness, or lameness resulting in secondary back pain. In this case, it is vital to address the lameness issues with which the horse is trying to compensate, because just acupuncturing the back isn't addressing the underlying issue. Conversely, lameness issues with often cause the muscles of the back to tighten and spasm; this can persist even after the lameness has been resolved. Acupuncture is very effective in relaxing muscles, increasing circulation, and providing analgesia to the back, allowing the spine to return to normal function. If your horse has a lameness that is unable to be diagnosed, ensure that the horse's back is assessed. Many horses with back pain respond significantly to acupuncture treatments.

With horses treated with corticosteroid injections for cervical, lumbar, or sacroiliac pain, using acupuncture to support these therapeutic techniques can assist in improving the condition, as well as

prolonging the time between treatments. Once the inciting issue has been treated, many horses are able to use themselves properly and develop correct muscle tone, stabilizing the spine, and allowing the horse to work without pain.

As horse owners, you also need to be aware of any changes in your horse's behavior. He may be trying to tell you that something hurts. If your horse is having difficulty performing the tasks or at the level he has previously been able to do, there may be a physical issue. He may be body sore from exercise and training, have saddle fit issues, or be experiencing painful muscle spasms.

### **How does acupuncture work?**

Acupuncture works in a multitude of different ways. It causes a cascade of events to occur within the body. When the needle is inserted there is a localized response within the tissues involving fascia, muscle, nerves, vessels, and chemicals/inflammatory mediators the body uses to communicate, whereby altering the surrounding tissue. This is referred to as neuromodulation. Other things that cause neuromodulation include examples such as environmental factors, diet/nutrition, medications, emotions, and senses (sight, sound etc.). Repetitive acupuncture treatments create help create lasting positive neuromodulation.

When the needle stimulates a specific acupuncture point on the body it triggers specific sensory receptors, which send impulses along the now activated nerve fibers that transmit signal from the periphery of the body to the central nervous system. The signal then travels along the central nervous system to the part of the brain responsible for pain control. Here natural pain killing neurotransmitters and hormones are released, such as endorphins, serotonin and norepinephrine, which assist in blocking pain. They go on to cause a multitude of effects throughout the body- within muscles, organs etc. These effects include but are not limited to assisting with the healing process, increasing circulation, muscle relaxation, stimulating nerve repair/regeneration, stimulating the body's immune system, and providing analgesia (pain control/relief). These effects only occur when specific points are stimulated. They are areas of increased nerve activity and generally occur where a nerve enters a muscle, along a superficial nerve, or around areas of dense nervous tissue.

Basically, acupuncture stimulates the body to do what it does naturally. It balances and provides homeostasis (the tendency of the physiological system to maintain internal stability, owing to the coordinated response of its parts to any situation or stimulus that would tend to disturb its normal condition or function). Its homeostatic effects include anti-inflammatory responses, interacting with opioid, serotonin and pain modulators in the brainstem, and it interacts with the autonomic nervous system (the involuntary nervous system- the part of the peripheral nervous system that acts as a control board functioning largely below the level of consciousness, and controls visceral functions. The ANS affects heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, salivation, perspiration, diameter of the pupils, urination etc. (general organ function)). Acupuncture stimulates the body's own system of healing by reestablishing equilibrium. No one mechanism can explain all of the effects acupuncture has on the body and its function.

### **What is happening during the myofascial exam?**

When palpating acupuncture points, the reaction of the horse can give the examiner information regarding the issue and tools for diagnosis. Often time the correlation of acupuncture points can help identify a particular syndrome. Generally speaking if a group of correlated points are sore, it indicates a particular anatomical area is sore. Reaction to palpation at particular points corresponds with specific conditions.

### **What is a core point versus a myofascial point?**

Core point are documented acupuncture points that often correspond with specific nerves, whether along its axon, at the nerve ending, or at its origin at the spinal cord. Acupuncture is used to map out

the problem in the body. Most abnormalities in the body (muscle pain, decreased circulation, inflammation, organ dysfunction etc.) correlates with a specific map set by the central nervous system. Acupuncture points and channels correlate with this mapping system and by palpation along these channels/points, it can assist in localizing the issues. Each acupuncture point may have several different meanings or indications. For example if there is sensitivity along the bladder channel in the lumbar region, it may correlate with lumbar pain, or could be referred pain from hock issues, or may be due to kidney issues. Myofascial points tend to involve a trigger point, a myotendinous junction (where muscle meets tendon), or a motor end plate (where a nerve ending communicates with a muscle). Acupuncture assists in decreasing pain from myofascial trigger points; it increases local blood flow, oxygenation, and tissue perfusion. It assists in improved nerve communication and pain control.

### **What is a trigger point?**

A trigger point is described as a hyperirritable point within a muscle causing a taut band or hardened knot. Trigger points cause stiffness, decreased range of motion, tenderness, and pain. Some trigger points are obvious and actively palpated. They can be locally painful or can cause referred pain at a distant site. Pressure during a myofascial examination might generate pain in a predictable region, which corresponds to muscle pain/issues at a remote location (referred pain).

### **Does acupuncture help with lameness diagnosis?**

Acupuncture is an excellent adjunct to traditional lameness diagnostic methods. It may not pinpoint an exact diagnosis but it will provide valuable information to where the horse is reactive and help localize the issue. Often times when there is joint pain/issues, the joint and its associated soft tissue structures may become hyper- or hypomotile leading to decreased range of motion, stiffness, pain, and muscle/tendon/ligament contracture and weakness. This, in turn, causes muscle contracture and trigger points due to local damage and activation of the nervous system. Long term this may cause muscle atrophy due to disuse because of the pain or due to the constant stress on the nerves. In general, acupuncture is an excellent adjunct therapy to treating referred pain from lameness.

### **If I do acupuncture, do I need to do anything else?**

When acupuncture is used in conjunction with traditional treatments/western medicine (neck, back, hock injections etc.), it prolongs time between treatments and improves the response to the treatments. It works best by supporting current therapy techniques.

### **How will my horse respond to the needle?**

Acupuncture needles are very thin, stainless steel, and sterilized. Generally there is a brief moment of sensitivity when the needle is placed and activated, however once the needle is in place, most horses relax into the treatment. It is ideal to see them resting a leg, lowering their head, chewing, licking their lips, yawning etc. Some acupuncture points may be more sensitive than others, and a horse may be more reactive at this site. Some horses may be mildly apprehensive their first treatment, but generally they relax and may even fall asleep during subsequent treatments. Occasionally some horses respond with excitation or overstimulation at a particular site. Some horses may react more to the needle being taken out, than when it is inserted, however this is rare.

### **What are the side effects?**

Side effects are minimal. Normal potential responses include sedation, excitation, mild bleeding from the needled site, and possible effects on performance.

### **How long does a treatment last?**

Generally a treatment lasts anywhere from 5-30 minutes. The horse often may dictate how long they will tolerate the needles.

**How often should acupuncture be performed?**

How often acupuncture should be performed is variable depending on the horse and the condition being treated. Conditions that have been going on for extended periods of time, will not be fixed with one treatment, where as acute conditions can resolve much quicker with just a few treatments. Generally, a horse is treated once weekly for at least 4 treatments, then most times the horses can be maintained once every 4-6 weeks. If an acute condition is being treated, then acupuncture treatments may be required more frequently (2-3 treatments weekly or biweekly) initially and then tapered down for maintenance once the disease process/injury/lameness etc. is under control. In the case of chronic problems of long duration, treatment may take several months. To receive the best results acupuncture may be combined with more traditional therapies.

**Do I need to give my horse time off after treatments?**

Generally, the horse can be ridden prior to treatment. The horse should have the 24 hours following acupuncture off from work. They may still maintain their routine turnout schedule. Some horses may be sore the 24 hours following treatment, then start showing improvements in the following days. It has been documented that many of the changes to the body initiated by acupuncture continue occurring well after the needle is removed, up to 24-36 hours.

**What can I expect following treatment?**

Most issues do not start overnight; acupuncture isn't going to correct it overnight. With acupuncture you establish a cumulative effect- you should see responses with each consecutive treatment. Many of the changes to the body initiated by acupuncture continue occurring well after the needle is removed, up to 24-36 hours. The positive effects should be noted after this time period.

**What are some other ways that acupuncture points may be stimulated?**

Alternate modes of stimulation include aquapuncture, electroacupuncture, and moxibustion (use of heat), and laser.

**What is aquapuncture?**

In some circumstances an acupuncture point or trigger point may be injected with a substance such as Vitamin B12 or Traumeel, as it can assist in making the effects of treatment last longer.

**What is electroacupuncture?**

Electroacupuncture is the practice of passing a small electric current between two needles. It augments the dry needling process: it prolongs the time required between acupuncture treatments and enhances the effects of the treatment allowing it to last longer. It stimulates nerves, provides pain relief, and lowers the need for pain medications.