

The Equine Journal - "Alternative Therapies - Ways to Improve Your Horse's Health"

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If you've ever considered alternative therapies to help your horse heal from injuries or just feel more supple and comfortable, the choices are wide-ranging and worth a closer look. Chiropractic treatments, therapeutic massage, acupressure, and LED light therapy are among the treatments in regular use for both competition horses and non-competition horses, helping with lameness, stiffness, flexion, and even digestive issues. We went right to the source to find out how these therapies benefit the horse and when it's best to use them.

Equine massage therapist, Denise Bean-Raymond, (on right) works on a horse.



Chiropractic Therapy

Chiropractic therapy for horses is a growing field. In the United States alone, about 100 new students a year are enrolled to become certified equine chiropractors through Options for Animals in Wellsville, Kansas. Only Doctors of Veterinary Medicine or Doctors of Chiropractic Medicine can enroll. Veterinarians comprise 60% of the students. The other 40% are already certified chiropractors for humans, and they have discovered how rewarding it is to treat animals. Dr. Dennis Eschbach, a co-owner and instructor at the school, says the goal of the teaching is to “bring our gift of chiropractic care into animal health care and give animals a better quality of life.”

The emphasis is on integrating the treatment with the care of the primary veterinarian. Equine pathology, anatomy, physiology, and functional neurology of the horse are all part of the program.

Chiropractic adjustments are often considered part of an ongoing wellness program when the horse may be a little stiff or not moving properly. “You don't have to wait till the animal is lame,” Dr. Eschbach advises. The horse may begin performing better almost right away, and because they are so good at hiding pain, their behavior may improve as well. “It helps the body deal with problems better and improves the quality of life,” he says. It can help geriatric horses deal with degenerative issues or can help foals with development problems. It can relieve stiffness or problems in the back and neck, but also can help digestive issues, liver function, and the joints.

Adjusting such a large animal may seem improbable, but Dr. Eschbach explains “It’s very specific; you adjust just one vertebra at a time.” Areas of the horse’s body are divided into sections that the chiropractor works on. Applying knowledge of neuropathology, the chiropractor can help coordinate the way all parts of the body work together and bring the body back into balance.

One graduate of the school, Dr. Bruce Indek of Quincy, Massachusetts, a chiropractor who divides his time between treating humans (30%) and animals (70%), treats both horses and their riders because both affect one another. His equine clients range from Grand Prix dressage horses to backyard pets, and he treats problems with flexing the poll, lower back, legs and hocks, the effects of bad shoeing, and even navicular.

“Chiropractic therapy involves a gentle but firm means of making adjustments,” he says. “Everyone thinks we put bones back in place – that’s not what we do. We adjust joints that move in different planes, using a precise force into the joint to help them unlock.” This stimulates the nerves and muscles and helps the body adjust itself. Much of the work you see a chiropractor do is palpating the spine and joints to determine the range of motion. In the spine, a common problem is called Vertebral Subluxation Complex (VSC), when one or more vertebrae, which are supposed to move in different planes, get stuck. As a result, the muscles and ligaments tighten, and the nerves that control organ and muscle function can “short circuit.”

Chiropractic therapy can help a horse be more comfortable after stall rest, which upsets the horse’s natural balance. It can resolve issues after the owner discovers that poorly fitting tack has caused pressure points. It can help when any injury has caused the horse to compensate by overusing different parts of the body. And because it’s not always just a one-time treatment, Dr. Indek gives his clients “homework” to help flex the affected areas between visits.

Horses respond well to chiropractic work. “Most of them get a dazed, inward look. Then they lean on me, because the force of the pressure feels good,” Dr. Indek says. Some horses don’t want to move away at the end of a treatment. He pointed out that in the late 1800s, chiropractic treatments were done on animals to prove the benefits because there was no “placebo effect” – the animals had no expectations or influence one way or the other.

Massage Therapy

Chiropractic therapy and massage therapy complement one another, and equine massage therapist Denise Bean-Raymond, of Exclusive Equestrian Services in Danvers, Massachusetts, has often worked on the same horses in conjunction with Dr. Indek, as well as many of her own clients, at show jumping events and at barns around the northeast.

“By having the muscles soft and pliable and rid of tightness, the results of chiropractic adjustment will be more effective and longer lasting,” she says. Working

on a horse's muscles "helps to balance the entire body so the horse can move, work, and perform at his full capacity. Horses are 60% muscle, so they have a very large muscle mass compared to their body structure. When the muscles are tight, they are no longer able to effectively eliminate waste products, which results in a buildup of toxicity and compromises the muscles' ability to collect oxygen. It's a vicious cycle.

"Manipulating the tissues of the different muscle groupings releases the tightness and also releases endorphins, which are natural painkillers. It increases blood flow, flushing out the toxins and stimulating the lymphatic system. It gives the muscles an anaerobic workout, where you are doing the work for the horse, helping to prevent muscle atrophy and muscle breakdown. Massaging helps to restore the length of the muscle fibers, restoring mobility."

Massage therapy can be a wonderful, preventive treatment to ensure the horse's muscles are working properly and at full capacity, and are free from knots, congestion, and cellular waste. This reduces the risk of strain. Bean-Raymond compares it to changing the oil in a car, which is necessary even though the car may be running fine at the time. The majority of her clients choose massage for routine maintenance of their horses, and they report on the improvements in the horse's performance: longer strides, easier lead changes, better collection, rounder jumping, going better to the right or left than before. "Very often you do not notice a loss in the range of motion until the range of motion is restored," she says.

Massage therapy is also an effective tool for speeding up the healing process after an injury by increasing the blood flow to the area, bringing swelling down and helping to rid the area of fluid. For horses coming back from a long layup or for geriatric horses, massage can help tone the muscles and reduce muscle loss.

Acupressure

As a hunter/jumper trainer and rider, and author of *The Illustrated Guide to Holistic Care for Horses*, Bean-Raymond is dedicated to helping horses and also employs acupressure as an alternative therapy. "The principles are the same as acupuncture, but the vehicle to administer it is the hands – not needles – to stimulate the area." She explains that along the channels of energy in the body, there are specific points that correlate to areas that are being treated. She locates the points and palpates them, looking for the horse's reaction and the temperature of the point. The channels are "basically like a highway system with various exits. If any become blocked, you have traffic problems." Using specific strokes on the affected point, she can draw more energy to the deficient area or sedate the point to disperse the energy.

Acupressure can help with conditions such as arthritis, back pain, cough, hives, heaving, muscular pain, joint pain, eye issues, head shaking, hoof pain, navicular pain management, and organ function. The reactions of some horses can be unusual, such as one who coughs throughout the process though not at any other time, or rocking back to stretch, or jumping in reaction to a specific point.

A bonus for these treatments, she says, is that they can very often replace drug therapy for competition horses.

LED Light Therapy

Another modality, equine light therapy, is helping horses stay comfortable for competition and can put the power of healing in a simple, easy-to-use tool for everyday treatment. “Some massage therapists employ these pads to help stimulate specific areas of the body while they massage another area,” says Christina Reguli of Equine Light Therapy in Tennessee, “but anyone can use them on their own horse.”

Christina discovered the benefits of LED light therapy for her show jumper, Gospel Hour, who was suffering from coffin bone rotation and laminitis and she was out of options for helping him. After reading extensive scientific publications about LED light therapy, which has been researched by NASA, but was very expensive to use, she was certain it could help. Her husband, Dennis, an electrical engineer, designed an affordable LED pad that is now manufactured in the U.S. and sold throughout North America.

The smaller of the pads uses 88 LEDs and attaches with VELCRO® around the horse’s legs, while the larger pad has 176 LEDs and can be placed on the horse’s back or wrapped around a larger area of leg. There are specific instructions for the amount of time to use them, typically 10 minutes for a session. The pads use a detachable power supply that plugs into the wall to ensure more consistent power than a battery could provide. There is very little heat involved, but the lights stimulate the cells. Christina says, “I always tell people to listen to their horses, and if they start to get fussy, go ahead and take it off and try again later that day or the next day. Within two or three days, they don’t want you to take it off.” They seem to enjoy it, and the results speak for themselves.

So how does it work? “LED light therapy is really a way to help the body heal itself. The lights have specific wavelengths that are absorbed by the mitochondrial of the cell,” she says. Using both red and infrared lights is beneficial because the wavelengths in the red spectrum are absorbed by skin layers very efficiently, while infrared light penetrates deeper to the muscles and bones. The combination of the two works in concert to provide such benefits as reducing scar tissue, improving tensile strength of ligaments to ensure better healing from a suspensory pull, healing bowed tendons, and relieving pain in the sacral and lower lumbar area. Many times, ligaments, when left to heal on their own, don’t have the same tensile strength prior to the injury, but light therapy can make a big difference.

When used before a competition, Christina says that the LED light therapy pads can help prevent injuries. “Studies show that light therapy helps prevent tiny muscle tears and inflammation, which is good for horses that have a tendency to get sore in specific areas.”

If you're considering options for helping your horse become more comfortable, or doing as much as you can to help him recover from an issue, you can be assured that there are plenty of horses out there benefiting from these therapies.