

## **The Horsemen's Yankee Pedlar – November 2009 -**

### **Stable Solutions: Working Together For A Healthy Horse**

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Alternative therapies represent a wide range of ways to improve the physical and mental health of your horse. They are generally used in addition to traditional Western veterinary medicine.

#### **A Team Approach**

Veterinary medicine is clearly the most important aspect of your horse's health care program. Annual vaccinations, regular de-worming, antibiotics and surgery all have their place. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly evident that we, as horse owners, can do even more to help our horses be healthy, comfortable, and happy in their work.

In many cases, your veterinarian may even recommend a particular alternative therapy for your horse in addition to the primary veterinary care for the problem. Horses that are stall-bound following surgery benefit from massage therapy to help keep circulation going to the muscles. If your horse is stiff to one side under saddle and your veterinarian doesn't find an orthopedic abnormality, he may recommend trying a series of acupuncture sessions or chiropractic treatment.

Choosing the right alternative therapy is important and there are several general principles to keep in mind. An accurate diagnosis of the problem is the cornerstone of effective treatment, and the only person who can and should diagnose a problem in your horse is a licensed veterinarian. A reputable alternative therapy practitioner will consult regularly with your veterinarian and provide written notes on each therapy session. They have a common goal—a happy, healthy patient.

Alternative therapies alone will not "cure" a horse. The same, however, can be said of many traditional medicines. But many horses will be made much more comfortable during the course of their traditional treatment or rehabilitation through the use of an appropriate alternative therapy.

Never forego a proven treatment that your veterinarian recommends for an unproven one. Your horse's condition may not be helped at all, and could even be made worse by an alternative treatment while appropriate treatment is delayed.

When thinking "outside the box" for alternative therapists who could help your horse, the best source of therapists is veterinary recommendations (and in fact many vets actually perform some of these therapies themselves). Check to see that the therapist has studied at an accredited program or at a university, and be wary of a therapist who claims that he/she can fix any condition in any horse.

#### **Massage Therapy**

Put in simple terms, the goal of equine sports massage therapy is to improve the health and function of your horse's muscles. A pliable, flexible muscle will have a greater range of motion than a stiff, tight one. This leads to improved suppleness, longer strides, easier jumping efforts and the ability to negotiate rough terrain safely. Increased circulation to the muscles brings them oxygen and nutrients as well as quickly removing metabolic waste products. This enhances the muscles' performance.

Like people, most horses find massage therapy to be mentally and physically relaxing. They tend to drop their heads, twiddle their lips, and even partly close their eyes. It obviously feels good to them, just as a back rub does to you after a long day of hard work.

Denise Bean-Raymond is an Equine Sports Massage Therapist and Acupressure Therapist.

She says, *"Massage therapy is a non-invasive healing modality in which a person uses his or her hands to manipulate the muscle tissue of the horse. This helps to alleviate knots, spasms, and entanglements of the fibers located within the various muscle groups. Massage is performed by using your hands in different positions and patterns called strokes. Each stroke is applied using a different amount of pressure. Observing the horse's response to the strokes is a key factor in a successful treatment so that the strokes can be altered as necessary."*

The strokes are usually used against the grain of the muscle fibers (knowledge of muscle anatomy is thus very important) and serve to loosen those fibers so that they can slide freely alongside each other. Simply put, you want the muscles to be like hot, buttered spaghetti—which is flexible and slippery—rather than like cold, leftover spaghetti, which is stuck together.

The massage therapist will know what "normal" muscle feels like in terms of softness and pliability, and can detect muscles that are too tight or hard under his/her hands. The therapist will devote extra time to working on a tight area so that it will relax and loosen up, constantly observing the horse's facial expressions.

Friction from the therapist's hands rubbing against the hair generates heat. The repeated pressure-then-release of the massage strokes stimulates circulation. Pressure via the hand momentarily occludes blood flow in the vessels. When the hand is lifted almost away from the area, the vessels spring back open (vasodilation) and the blood rushes into the area. This blood brings oxygen and nutrients (fuel) for the muscle contractions and removes the waste products. It is the alternating muscle contractions (shortening) and relaxations (lengthening) that produces movement of the limbs and body.

Every horse can benefit from massage therapy. Beginner lesson horses tend to suffer from repetitive motion syndrome (like a typist or assembly worker) because their muscles do the exact same thing over and over as they trot around an oval pattern in a flat ring.

Advanced competition horses will tend to get sore, tight muscles when they are acquiring a new skill. The limbs and body are working in a slightly new way and so the muscles get fatigued more easily, often leading to stiffness the following day. A horse with a severe injury in one limb/body part will stand and move asymmetrically, causing some muscles to become overly stressed. Massage can help alleviate muscle tension in all of these situations. Denise says, *"Massage is not only a tool for helping an issue that is already present, but is also a wonderful means of prevention. If a horse's muscles are free from problems and functioning properly, there is a decrease in the horse's risk of injury."* Horses with tired, tight muscles are more likely to stumble on the trail or injure a tendon/ligament when jumping a course of fences.

### **Chiropractic Treatment**

Chiropractic treatment is something that many people are familiar with, usually because they have sought help for their own sore backs. Chiropractic care for horses is stringently regulated because in order for the practitioner to be certified by the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association, he/she must be either a licensed veterinarian or human chiropractor.

Dr. Bethany Bowman, DC IVCA, practices chiropractic treatment on horses and dogs.

*"Wouldn't it be wonderful if every joint in a horse's body was to move symmetrically and correctly without pain? Chiropractic is manual medicine which approaches the horse from a mechanical and functional viewpoint. My job is to put motion into "stuck" joints. I use my hands on every articular joint in the horse to feel for a lack of movement and assess the animal's pain level. When I find a "stuck" joint, I put a very quick thrust through a specific vector of the joint, allowing for better movement and a higher level of performance in the animal. Essentially, chiropractic adjustment attempts to normalize the horse's neuromusculoskeletal mechanics, therefore allowing for a pain-free and productive life."* Typical visits begin with a thorough history, including both past injuries and current

concerns. Dr. Bowman performs both static and motion palpations on every joint, feeling for restrictions in the joints. She adjusts any regions which feel stuck with a fast, specific force applied to the joint. Then she re-palpates the region to determine if the adjustment was successful. "Monthly treatments allow me to continually and proactively assess the animal's pain levels, restrictions, and asymmetries."

### **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is a very ancient type of therapy, having been developed thousands of years ago in China. It deals with "chi," the flow of energy. This energy flows along meridians, which can be thought of as energy lines through the body. These energy lines, in turn, connect to nerves. Different points along the meridians correspond to different organs, nerves, body systems, and bodily functions. These are the so-called "acupuncture points." The goal of acupuncture is to bring the body back into balance, to eliminate excesses and deficiencies, and to improve the flow of energy along the meridians.

Acupuncture is practiced in several slightly different ways. Traditional Chinese medical acupuncture uses very tiny filiform needles for both people and horses. These are sterile, solid needles that penetrate the skin (They are never put into joints). The therapist will also use a teishin, sort of like a blunt probe, to put pressure on an acupuncture point without breaking the skin.

Many veterinarians use hollow acupuncture needles. This enables them to make saline injections into the acupuncture points via the needle. This is done to continue to stimulate the acupuncture point even after the needle has been removed. Some veterinarians in China inject herbs through hollow acupuncture needles.

The way acupuncture affects the body is by sticking the needles through the skin to stimulate acupuncture points along the meridians. By putting a needle into a meridian, the properties of the metal cause the "gate" at that point to open. Now the energy can flow along the meridian where it was previously blocked.

The horse starts to look like a pin cushion with many needles sticking out of him as the needles are left in place for a period of time to keep the gates open. And most horses don't seem to mind at all! Some animals will fall asleep during acupuncture treatments. Sedation is not recommended as it may interfere with the acupuncture effect.

Acupuncture can be used to treat a variety of problems, including musculoskeletal (such as back pain or osteoarthritis), neurological, and gastrointestinal. The acupuncturist develops a personalized prescription for each horse—what acupuncture points to put needles into—after getting a history from the owner and examining the horse.

In most cases, horses receive a series of sessions. Repeat treatments yield more success over time. Acupuncture is a very safe procedure when administered by a qualified practitioner.

### **Acupressure Therapy**

Acupressure therapy is the use of the therapist's hands to stimulate various acupuncture points (here often called acupoints) found within the body. Denise Bean-Raymond performs this type of therapy as well as massage, practicing the two modalities as individual (separate) sessions. "Ultimately, the goal of acupressure therapy is to promote overall emotional, physical, and mental balance which allows each individual horse to exist and function at its own specific optimum level. These goals are achieved by either preventing a health concern from arising, managing an existing health issue or eliminating a health problem.

*"Acupressure therapy has effectively been proven to aid in the strengthening of the body's immune system, alleviate pain, increase blood flow to promote the healing process and release the natural hormone of cortisone to reduce inflammation."*

How are these goals achieved? The therapy seeks to identify imbalances in the horse's body where "chi" energy is not flowing freely throughout the system. Interruptions in energy flow

often lead to health problems. Acupoints are specific areas throughout the horse's body that can be directly influenced by touch. Equine acupressure therapy seeks to locate the imbalance and restore energy flow to promote healing and continued wellness through touch.

### **Reiki**

Reiki is a Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation that promotes healing. Reiki is administered by the gentle "laying of hands" on or above the body. Reiki therapy sessions work as Reiki's "universal life force energy" flows through the hands of a Reiki practitioner. Reiki Master Cynthia Godin says, "Reiki treats the whole being at all levels: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. It works in conjunction with all other veterinary and therapeutic techniques at relieving side effects and promoting faster recovery. Reiki's balancing effects improve health and enhance the quality of life.

*"Reiki for animals is always safe and gentle, never causing harm, anxiety or fear. Animals respond intuitively to Reiki's healing energy and allow the healing of emotional, behavioral, and physical illnesses and injuries. All animals are highly sensitive to the energy around them and can sense whether it is positive or negative. The goal of Reiki therapy is simply to make the horse feel better."*

### **Magnetic Therapy**

Magnetic therapy is based on the fact that all living organisms possess complex bio-electromagnetic systems. This therapy utilizes the natural energies of magnetism as a tool for effectively healing and restoring the natural balance of the body.

Every cell has a magnetic field and sometimes these get out of balance. By applying a second external magnetic field, usually in a leg wrap or body blanket, you can affect the cellular magnetic fields. This procedure produces the correct cellular spin within the body tissues. Cells that are not spinning correctly lack oxygen, are acidic, and are in an unhealthy state. This correlates with pain, inflammation, and inhibition of healing.

Several studies of the effects of magnetic fields have also revealed that blood flow increases under the influence of magnets. The electromagnetic fields achieve this by dilating blood vessels, thus bringing more oxygen to the muscles.

Magnetic therapy should only be used after your horse has been examined by a veterinarian and a specific diagnosis has been reached. Then consultation with a certified magnetic therapist will help you decide what type of magnetic therapy will be beneficial. Conditions that may benefit from this therapy include (but are not limited to) muscle atrophy, back pain, osteoarthritis, and degenerative navicular disease.

Magnets come in several different "versions." It is important to use the correct type of magnet for the problem and to always use that magnet correctly. Once a horse owner has been shown how to do the therapy properly, he/she can usually do the successive treatments alone. And once the initial problem has resolved, regular maintenance applications of the magnet may help prevent recurrence of the problem.

### **Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy**

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy is not new, but is a relative newcomer to equine medicine. It has a long history in human medicine, where it is most widely known for its use in the treatment of decompression sickness (i.e. the "bends") in divers as well as more recently in the treatment of various medical conditions.

Equine patients may have many conditions similar to those on the FDA-approved list for humans. These include wounds with poorly vascularized, traumatized tissue or flaps, soft tissue infections, such as tendon sheath infections, bone infections (osteomyelitis), birth asphyxia, peripheral nerve injury, such as brachial plexus injury, and intestinal ischemia (lack of blood supply), such as colon torsion and small intestinal strangulation.

A high concentration of inspired oxygen has several valuable physiological effects on the

body. It stimulates tissue healing by reducing swelling. It increases cell division in the cells that line capillary blood vessels, thus promoting new capillary vessel in-growth that is critical for healing. Oxygen also increases division within the fibroblasts, the cells that make collagen fibers.

For treatments, horses stand inside a chamber, much like being in a horse trailer or van. Pressure in the chamber is gradually increased, delivering oxygen through the floor of the chamber and gradually removing room air through the roof. Technicians monitor the horse via video cameras. After about 30 minutes, the treatment pressure and maximal oxygen concentration is reached. The total time in the chamber varies 45-60 minutes.

The protocol—time of treatment, maximal pressure, number of treatments—depends on the condition being treated. For example, a horse with a bone infection might receive 10-12 treatments.

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy is a supportive or adjunctive treatment. The primary condition is still managed using other medical treatments, such as appropriate antibiotics for bone or tendon sheath infections. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy should be viewed as a way to enhance tissue healing. The goals are to shorten the recovery time for injuries and illnesses, improve survival rates for devastating illnesses, and shorten the horse's time in the hospital.

### **New Rehabilitation Therapies**

Swimming has been utilized for a number of years in rehabilitation and conditioning programs for horses. There is a new tool—an above-ground water treadmill—that speeds rehab therapy. This new technique goes a step further than swimming by allowing some weight-bearing while the horse is exercised.

The water treadmill uses the effects of water (buoyancy, resistance, hydrostatic pressure) and the effects of hydrokinetic exercise facilitated by the horse's own movements on the non-slip surface of the treadmill.

The benefit of walking through water, as opposed to air, is the resistance factor. The horse has to use his legs harder so he gets much more of a workout. There is also some buoyancy to the water, so there is not as much concussion on the hooves and limbs as there would be on a dry treadmill.

Another new type of therapy is the coldwater spa. Cold therapy is a time-tested method of reducing swelling and inflammation associated with injuries, but this unique method stands the horse in extremely cold salt water that is aerated and circulating.

Since salt water can help prevent as well as treat injuries (by tightening up the tendons and ligaments as well as relieving any stress and strain from training workouts), this therapy is very popular in the United Kingdom and Europe since all drugs are prohibited for equine athletes. The salty water also acts as a poultice for wounds, drawing out infection from the tissues.

The frequency of the treatment for a specific horse will depend on the type of injury, its severity, and how recently it occurred. The depth of the water can be altered, depending on the location of the injury.

There are many other types of alternative therapies in addition to those described in this article. By remaining open-minded and educated about using them along with traditional veterinary medicine, you can improve the health, comfort and happiness of your horse.