



Acupuncture (updated February 2015)

The American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Equine Practitioners currently accept acupuncture as a valid treatment modality. But so many clients remain skeptical when considering acupuncture on their horse. Brandon Equine Medical Center will walk you through the process and communicate what to expect with acupuncture treatment, considering each individual horse's needs. Dr. Michelle Twilla obtained her acupuncture training at the Chi Institute of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine and is available for acupuncture treatment appointments or to answer any of your acupuncture questions.

What is Acupuncture? The basis behind acupuncture is balancing the body. Qi is the vital life force or energy that runs along meridians, or channels throughout the body. In Chinese medicine, an imbalance of yin and yang leads to pain or illness. The imbalance is essentially blocking the flow of Qi. Stress, trauma, and an endless list of environmental factors can cause imbalance in any living thing.

There are 14 primary meridians in the body and acupuncture focuses on points along these channels. Stimulation of these points heals by reducing inflammation and pain. Needles are placed into the acupuncture points along meridians to stimulate and open the flow of Qi, subsequently relieving the blockage or stagnation.

How do you know if your horse needs acupuncture? Brandon Equine Medical Center practices a balance of Eastern and Western Medicine. At your first appointment, your horse will undergo a conventional physical examination as well as a medical examination using Chinese methods. If acupuncture does not seem to be the most appropriate and effective treatment, then traditional Western medicine will be recommended. Some cases respond best to a combination of both Eastern and Western medicine.

There are many conditions that can be treated with acupuncture. Two major conditions and the results after treatment are:

1. Relieving musculoskeletal pain = enhanced performance
2. Decrease inflammation = increases energy

Other conditions that benefit from acupuncture are:

- Unexplained lameness
- Back pain
- Behavioral issues
- Hormone and metabolic imbalance
- Reproductive disorders

- Heaves (RAO, COPD)
- Anhidrosis (non-sweater)
- Neurological disorders
- Laminitis
- GI conditions
- And, acupuncture is good preventative medicine

What to expect for your first acupuncture treatment... First, a history will be taken and a complete physical exam will take place. This is to ensure that a serious condition, such as a major musculoskeletal lesion that would respond better to western medicine, is not overlooked. A traditional Chinese veterinary examination and diagnosis follows the conventional one. The Chinese exam includes a tongue and pulse inspection followed by a “scan” which is a physical palpation over the meridians. This helps determine which acupuncture points need treatment. The needles range in size from 0.5 inches long to 4 inches long. The traditional acupuncture needle is very thin and does not have a hollow core. Called dry needle technique, the needle is inserted into the skin or muscle and left alone for a period of time. An electrical current can be applied, which is not painful. This is called electroacupuncture. Other techniques include inserting a hollow hypodermic needle to inject either saline, B12 or the horse’s own blood. Moxa is a warming technique that we use less frequently.

Most horses respond well to the needle placement and even appear relaxed or sedated. Of course, there are a small percentage of horses that object to the placement of needles. These patients take more time to treat and chemical sedation could be recommended to perform a thorough treatment.

The number of needles and the length of time each remains inserted will vary depending on the ailment and physical state of the horse. Well-conditioned, performance horses may tolerate more needles for a longer period of time than a critical horse being treated for colic or laminitis.

How many treatments will your horse need? Most patients require at least three treatments. Of course, every horse has varied responses. If you are not getting the results you expect after three treatments, then acupuncture is probably not the right treatment modality for that specific condition or horse. Positive responses have been observed after just one treatment in many cases. An acute condition such as laminitis can benefit from being treated frequently. Some horses seem to stay “well balanced” if treated on a maintenance schedule of three to four times a year. Chronic conditions may need multiple treatments before seeing an improvement. Keep in mind that some conditions will improve quicker when coupled with western medicine modalities. Dr. Twilla will advise you of recommended treatment as well as an appropriate schedule for your horse and condition after the first exam.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.