

How Acupuncture Can Help Your Horse

Dr. Matilda Lee

Hagyard Equine Medical Institute

The Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) system has been around for thousands of years. It was developed when there was limited information on anatomy, and instruments were not available to visualize the microscopic building blocks of the body. Yet they had a very accurate understanding of the body and how it functions. Acupuncture was likely developed when people, from experience, realized that piercing specific points of the body had predictable and reproducible effects, such as pain relief, clearing of sinuses, or reducing fever etc.

Both "Western" and "Eastern" medicine recognize the importance of maintaining a balance within all the body systems to maintain health. If there is imbalance there is disease. In TCM it is also important how the environment, mood, emotion and stress affects the whole.

What is an Acupoint?

Acupoints are pin-point areas on the body where the skin is actually a little thinner and have a lower electrical (galvanic) resistance (can be measured with an ohmmeter). They have an increase of blood-supply, nerve-endings (different types), and mast cells (a type of immune cell in the tissues). When stimulated they exert specific physiological effects.

What is a Meridian?

Most acupoints are associated with meridians. These build a network connecting all parts of the body like conduits of communication and transportation, from front to back, top to bottom, and inside to outside. They often run along pathways of major peripheral nerves. Each paired meridian is associated with an internal organ system. Because the meridians are paired, it is not necessary to use acupoints on both sides to achieve the desired effect. When needling a point on a meridian it is possible to benefit the whole meridian - that is how you can benefit the eye by using a point on the hind leg!

What is Qi?

Qi is most often translated to energy. It is what makes the heart beat, the blood flow, the muscles move, and the stomach secrete acid. Qi circulates around the meridians ensuring that everything in the body flows smoothly and the systems remain in balance. Pain and disease results when Qi no longer flows smoothly through the body. In other words it controls all the functions of the body: the muscles, the blood, the organs, the nervous and the endocrine system.

What is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the use of special needles and techniques to stimulate acupoints. Just as in Western medicine, a thorough physical exam and history is necessary to diagnose the disease pattern and to determine which acupoints to use in the treatment. Different points have different effects and are too numerous to list, but most commonly the goals of the treatment involve moving Qi that is stagnant, invigorating Qi in case of deficiency or drain excess Qi to re-establish balance. There are different ways to stimulate the acupoint depending on what is being treated.

- "Dry-needling": the use of acupuncture needles and hand manipulation
- Electrostimulation: applying low electrical currents to needles to strengthen the stimulation
- Warm needling: a chinese herb, mugwort, is burned on the needle to open the meridian and invigorate Qi
- Aquapuncture: injecting a fluid into the acupuncture point to lengthen and strengthen the stimulation of the acupoint.
- Laser: a low power laser can be used, however they do not penetrate very deeply into the tissues
- Hemoacupuncture: use of a hypodermic needle to puncture an acupoint and cause it to bleed.
- Pneumoacupuncture: use of a hypodermic needle to inject air into and acupoint
- Implants: use of surgical implants to have a longer lasting stimulation

The effects produced can be due to the triggering of nerves, release of hormones, or stimulation of the immune system. Acupuncture can greatly benefit many commonly occurring conditions in the horse. It can be used to: relieve/relax muscle spasms and myofascial trigger points; increase the blood supply to an area; improve the immune system; stimulate nerves and strengthen muscles; benefit reproduction. It can also: improve the throat score/improve laryngeal hemiplegia; relieve back or other muscle soreness; help testicles descend – Ridgling; improve contracted tendons in foals; stimulate appetite; calm an overly nervous/anxious horses; relieve Colic and diarrhea; treat anaestrus in mares; treat poor tone/fluid in uterus in mares; aid in healing of wound and tissues; aid in treating various eye conditions