

Alternative Therapies

Today, more than ever, many horse owners are turning to alternative therapies as both an adjunct to traditional medicine, or for the sole treatment of a specific veterinary condition. With so many health care options available today, it is easy for horse owners to become confused as to which option would be the best choice for their horse's needs. Here is a basic overview with regard to the use of alternative therapies, along with a brief description of a few of the more common therapies available (though there are many more not mentioned in this article). I hope this helps clear up some of the confusion.

INTRODUCTION

Alternative therapies are frequently referred to as non-traditional, adjunctive, or complementary therapies. They are either administered individually or used in conjunction with traditional therapies and most (but not all) are non-invasive in nature. Many have an origin in human medicine such as chiropractic and acupuncture. While the AMVA frowns on treatments which are not performed specifically by licensed veterinarians, not all veterinarians are sufficiently trained in alternative therapies. Therefore, depending upon the laws specific to any particular state, these therapies are frequently administered by professionals trained and licensed in that specific therapy, often by direct referral from a veterinarian. (Remember, however, for *traditional medicine* and primary care horse owners should consult the services of a qualified veterinarian)

Chiropractic

The popularity of chiropractic in the animal health care system has increased greatly in the past few years, and currently it is one of the most commonly used alternative therapies available to horse owners. While the notion of applying chiropractic to horses may seem relatively new, manipulation of vertebral segments in animals has been practiced since the beginning of chiropractic, over 100 years ago. D.D. Palmer, the founder of Chiropractic, wrote that chiropractic "*...is applicable to all animals who have a vertebral backbones.*" Interestingly, the first Chiropractic College had a veterinary clinic associated with it which was used for placebo-free research. Manipulation as a healing art is actually 4000 years old, and has evolved into both osteopathic manipulation, and specific spinal manipulation performed in the practice of chiropractic.

The basic principle of chiropractic revolves around the premise that **STRUCTURE + FUNCTION = PERFORMANCE**. Abnormal structure or function (stresses and strains) causes tissue breakdown, pain or disease. Specifically, chiropractic seeks to diagnose and alleviate the altered mechanics of vertebral segments (called *subluxations*) which irritate nerve roots and blood vessels which branch off from the spinal cord and cause altered function.

Chiropractic removal of these *subluxations* is referred to as an adjustment. The adjustment is a *specific* movement in a *specific* direction with a *specific* force. These adjustments are done manually by the doctor using his or her hands to apply corrective pressure to the spine in a *specific* direction and location in order to restore normal function. Generally spinal adjustments are painless and they are *not* particularly forceful when done correctly.

Many horse owners are finding their horses perform better with regular chiropractic care

**Chiropractic should only be done by a licensed professional with experience in manipulation!*

(Note – Because of both the popularity and lack of general knowledge concerning chiropractic, I will be dedicating a future article solely to this subject, as it cannot be adequately covered here)

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is a system of medical treatment brought to light almost 200 years ago by a German physician named Samuel Hahnemann. In his first experiments, he discovered that the substance **quinine** actually caused signs of malaria in high doses. He then diluted it and prepared it as a homeopathic therapeutic remedy, and was able to cure an outbreak of malaria with far better results than traditional medicine. He published his findings in 1796, and the science of homeopathy has grown into world wide use since that time.

The term 'homeopathy' is derived from the Greek word *Homoios*, meaning "like". Homeopathy is the practice of treating like with like that is, treating an illness with an extremely dilute amount of the same substance which in large amounts will actually *produce* the illness. Homeopathy sees the symptoms as the body's attempt to heal the illness, and seeks to stimulate and not to suppress this reaction.

Homeopathy stimulates the body's own natural powers of recovery. The three principles of homeopathy are:

1. A medicine which in large doses recreates the symptoms of a disease will in small doses cure the disease;
2. By extreme dilution, the medicine's curative properties are enhanced and all the poisonous qualities and side effects are lost;
3. Homeopathic medicines are prescribed by a study of the characteristic, temperament, and symptoms specific to that individual

Homeopathic remedies are usually from a natural source, such as plants or minerals, and are progressively diluted and 'potentized' by violent shaking at each step, until the final remedy often theoretically contains none of the original substance!

Homeopaths view disease as a manifestation of a disturbance in the "vital force," and symptoms of the disease are absolutely unique to each patient. For this reason, two patients can show identical symptoms but require a different remedy to correct their condition.

There are over 2,000 homeopathic remedies from which to choose, are very inexpensive and deemed to be virtually free of side effects.

Magnetic Therapy

The metabolic function of the body is extremely complex and the physical effects of magnetic fields are not completely understood. Magnetic therapies have been used for centuries and basically have no known side effects, but has been shown to relax tense muscles, relieve muscular and skeletal pain, and accelerate the healing process. Today, horse owners are using magnets to aid healing by using them in boots, wraps, and even blankets.

A magnet attracts electronically charged blood particles to the applied area. The blood is drawn to the magnet at an accelerated pace and in the process, oxygenates the blood cells. Benefits include:

1. enhanced circulation
2. dilatation of blood vessels
3. draws oxygen and vital nutrients, thus promoting healing.

Magnets themselves do not heal, but the fact that increased blood flow reduces pain is well established. Magnets are thought to reduce pain because increased blood flow helps carry away toxins and bring white blood cells, both of which help reduce swelling, inflammation, and pain.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a healing art which originated in China about 5000 years ago. It centers around the theory that to be healthy one must have balance within their healing energy known as chi. This 'vital life energy' is present in all living organisms, and the flow of this energy needs to be balanced and uninterrupted for the individual to experience health. Blockages and imbalances of this energy will result in pain and illness.

Acupuncture seeks to remove blockages in energy by helping chi to freely move along 12 major pathways, known as meridians. Each meridian is connected to a specific organ or linked to a specific organ system. Acupuncturists attempt to restore the normal balance of healing energy by inserting needles into specific acupoints (there are over one thousand of them) along these meridians in order to redirect the flow of energy. Sometimes additional forms of stimulation to acupoints are used to help redirect this energy such as moxa or B12 or iodine injections.

The philosophy of acupuncture states that any block of chi energy causes illness as a result of the imbalances in the meridian system. These imbalances are related to the dynamic interaction between one's inner environment and the exterior world.

Causes include emotional states such as anxiety, stress, anger, fear or grief, poor nutrition, weather conditions, hereditary factors, infections, poisons and trauma. The principal aim of acupuncture is treating the whole individual to recover the equilibrium between the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of life.

OTHER THERAPIES

Other alternative therapies include massage, Reiki, aromatherapy, and herbs/supplements. Physical therapies such as laser, therapeutic ultrasound, trigger point injection, and shock-wave therapy are playing a greater role in traditional equine health care as well.

I emphatically encourage horse owners to ensure that *anyone* (including their veterinarian) performing any therapies on their horses has been sufficiently trained in and/or certified or licensed in that particular specialty. Do not hesitate to question someone about their credentials, or obtain referrals from others who have used their services. In the end, your horse's health and welfare is *your* responsibility.

Until next time,
Dr. Bev Gordon