



## Complementary Therapeutic Options for Horses

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The upcoming summer Olympics will see some of the finest equine athletes in the world compete in various equestrian events. These horses are the very top of the performance horse elite and are attended to by team veterinarians. Many of these veterinarians will utilize veterinary acupuncture and chiropractic in their treatment regimens for these outstanding athletes.

The use of "complementary" medicine continues to increase in veterinary practice. While there are a myriad of therapies that fall within this broad term, the two most utilized are veterinary acupuncture and chiropractic (sometimes referred to as manual therapy or spinal manipulative therapy). The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) refers to these types of therapies as "therapeutic options." These modalities complement our conventional or routine veterinary care. They are an adjunct to, not a replacement for, conventional veterinary medicine.

Acupuncture involves the insertion of needles through the skin at predetermined sites, called acupuncture points, or other sites--trigger points or ashi points. Besides the use of solid, typically stainless steel needles, other means of stimulating the points can be used. One of the most common methods is aquapuncture, in which a liquid, typically Vitamin B12, is injected into the point. While the practitioner initially treats the point with basic acupuncture (placing a needle through skin into the point), the aquapuncture process also leaves behind a liquid that continues to stimulate and treat the point with pressure (due to displacement of tissue by the fluid) and/or irritation over a period of time as it is absorbed. The effects of acupuncture therapy cannot be explained in terms of a single mechanism, but rather a series of interactions between the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems.

Chiropractic care focuses on the health and proper function of the spinal column; although the pelvis, limbs, and head are also considered. Chiropractic involves applying controlled forces to specific joints or anatomic regions, enacting a therapeutic response because of induced changes in joint structures, muscle function, and neurological reflexes.

Pain is the common clinical sign a horse exhibits that suggests acupuncture and/or chiropractic may be beneficial treatments. For performance horses, musculoskeletal issues are the most common problems treated with acupuncture and chiropractic. These include back pain, stiffness or reluctance to bend, not taking or maintaining the proper lead, an irritable attitude when saddled, not "driving from behind," or not rounding the back. Sometimes the chief complaint simply can be poor performance. Besides assisting with musculoskeletal problems, acupuncture can also be beneficial in the treatment of other problems such as certain types of colic, other gastrointestinal issues, certain eye problems (including corneal ulcers), reproductive problems, some neurological conditions, and even behavioral issues. Even if your horse is not a show horse in competition, it may very well benefit from veterinary acupuncture and/or chiropractic.

As mentioned earlier, acupuncture and chiropractic will be used by some of the veterinarians at the 2008 Olympics. These therapies will allow veterinarians to treat equine athletes for some of the problems discussed without the use of drugs or other therapies potentially prohibited by the Fédération Equestre Internationale.

Remember that therapeutic options are complementary or adjunctive therapies, not a replacement for conventional or routine veterinary care. It is important that you look for a veterinarian who has additional training in veterinary acupuncture and chiropractic to treat your horse. Without a proper understanding of your horse's anatomy and potential medical issues, a diagnosis and treatment plan cannot be made. If you are interested in complementary therapies for your horse, consult your veterinarian. For more information you can also check the AAEP Web site at [www.aaep.org/horseowner](http://www.aaep.org/horseowner).