

# Acupuncture and Rehabilitation

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## KEYWORDS

• Acupuncture • Integrative medicine • Rehabilitation

## KEY POINTS

- Acupuncture is one of the most common veterinary integrative medicine modalities.
- Acupuncture can greatly contribute to a rehabilitation protocol by promoting analgesia, tissue healing, and muscle strength.
- Acupuncture is safe, has minimal detrimental side effects, and is well tolerated by most horses.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent advances in sport horse medicine and rehabilitation have made it possible for equine athletes to reach new levels of excellence. Client demand for superior diagnostics and innovative treatment strategies requires equine practitioners to be more informed than ever before. In addition to Western advances in sport horse medicine, acupuncture for the equine athlete has become increasingly recognized as an effective and valuable tool to treat musculoskeletal conditions associated with the demands of intensive physical conditioning and performance and to aid in rehabilitating musculoskeletal injuries.

A 2008 survey conducted by the American Association of Equine Practitioners identified that 20% of equine practitioner respondents perform some form of integrative medicine treatment modality themselves (most commonly acupuncture and chiropractic) and, of those who do not, 80% refer cases specifically for complementary medicine to veterinarians who have this expertise. Currently most of the veterinary institutions in North America offer some form of integrative medicine, primarily acupuncture and chiropractic, in their clinical services and veterinary curriculum.

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The authors have nothing to disclose.

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Horse owners are attracted to acupuncture because it is safe, has minimal detrimental side effects, and is well tolerated by most horses. Horses experiencing performance issues associated with musculoskeletal pain, and who must comply with prohibited substance policies mandated by show associations, can benefit show-side from acupuncture and/or chiropractic treatments. This occurs at most elite competitions in compliance with the Fédération Equèstre Internationale (FEI) Sports.

Acupuncture is often sought directly by horse owners, sometimes without the involvement of their primary veterinarian, leading to a disconnection between this modality and traditional veterinary medicine. This has caused the creation of a rift between conventional medicine and integrative medicine, which is to the detriment of the horse: both practices can be mutually beneficial and rich in information that can optimize a patient's treatment response.

The goals of veterinary physical rehabilitation are to reduce pain; facilitate tissue healing; restore muscle strength, endurance, and proprioception; and restore the animal to its prior level of activity while preventing further injury. Acupuncture can greatly contribute to a rehabilitation protocol by promoting analgesia, tissue healing, and muscle strength.

Lameness is commonly encountered during a rehabilitation program and acupuncture can be used not only in the treatment but also in the detection of lameness in horses. Most horse owners cannot adequately detect lameness until it is severe, that is, present at the walk or trot. Recently, a prospective study was conducted to answer the question of whether palpation or scanning for reactive acupuncture points (acupuncture points) could be useful in screening for lameness in performance horses.<sup>1</sup> The study population consisted of 102 performance horses (jumpers, dressage horses, and Western performance horses) evenly distributed into lame and sound groups. These horses first underwent an acupuncture scan and then a routine lameness examination. The results of this study show that 78% (40/51) of sound horses were negative during the acupuncture scan (did not have a painful response at any of the acupuncture points palpated), whereas, only 18% (9/51) of lame horses were negative during the acupuncture scan ( $P < .001$ ), indicating that acupuncture scanning has a sensitivity of 82.4% in detecting lameness and a specificity of 78.4%. This suggests that horses that have a positive acupuncture scan should undergo a lameness examination to identify the presence and source of their lameness. The information provided by the acupuncture scan could also be useful while following a horse during rehabilitation of a musculoskeletal injury.

Acupuncture can certainly be used to help relieve pain in many musculoskeletal conditions, but it is critical that the primary cause also be addressed with traditional methods. Back pain is common in riding horses and can be difficult to diagnose and treat with conventional methods. Back pain is a good example of a term that encompasses a wide variety of conditions, with just as many causes. Horses experiencing chronic pain typically have a loss of performance and can also exhibit withdrawn social behavior and possibly experience a decreased appetite with subsequent decreased nutritional intake. This is due to the effect of chronic pain on the emotional centers of the limbic system, which motivates the individual to withdraw from damaging situations, to protect a damaged body part while it heals, and to avoid similar experiences in the future.<sup>2-5</sup>

The human model of spinal rehabilitation includes a multidisciplinary approach in the management of back problems. Advances in the treatment of equine back pain incorporate some of the same philosophies. The difficulty lies in identifying the exact cause of back pain, because it is often multifactorial. Back pain is commonly associated with lameness and it is critical to identify whether a horse is suffering from primary

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