

ACUPRESSURE: LET YOUR FINGERS DO THE WALKING



When added to your horse's health-care regimen, this safe, gentle therapy can enhance well being.



BY KARA L. STEWART

Imagine you're on a trail ride, spending several days in the backcountry with friends, far away from civilization. After the first day's lunch break your horse has a sudden allergic reaction, which constricts his windpipe. His breathing becomes increasingly labored, even at a standstill, and he eventually collapses to the ground.

You have no drugs, and the nearest vet is miles away in town. Can you help him?

Proponents of acupressure say indeed you can. Nancy Zidonis, Amy Snow and Marie Soderberg, authors of *Equine Acupressure. -A Working Manual*, say that by stimulating the acupressure points along the "lung meridian" the horse's body can restore itself to a more normal state, and the horse could eventually stabilize until you can reach a local veterinarian. And they have many such stories to share of how acupressure has helped horses in both dire and everyday situations.

An Ancient Treatment

In addition to working with equine veterinarians, many horse owners are exploring ways to take horse care into their own hands, literally.

Acupressure, often considered an alternative or complementary therapy to traditional Western medicine, is a 5,000-year-old treatment method that uses fingers, rather than needles as with acupuncture, to stimulate energy points in the body. Advocates believe acupressure helps to restore and maintain the harmonious



Shown with red dots, the acupoints Bladder 11 (near withers and above scapula) and Large Intestine 11 (on upper forearm) help strengthen the immune system and alleviate arthritis.

flow of energy (Chi) through the body.

What Is Acupressure?

Nancy, Amy and Marie have been practicing and teaching acupressure for 14 years. With professional training in human acupressure, they began their work with animals by collaborating with a veterinarian for three years to understand how acupressure

affected the equine body. Nancy and Amy then founded Tallgrass Animal Acupressure to bring training courses, instructional manuals, meridian charts and a video to horse and pet owners, trainers and healthcare professionals.

According to Nancy, "Similar to acupuncture, acupressure is based on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).



Finding Acupoint

Even armed with a helpful meridian chart, many newcomers to acupressure wonder if they're actually, working the correct area. How can you tell?

"Although each specific acupoint is between the size of the point of a needle and the size of a pea, the area of effectiveness is thought to range from the size of penny to a quarter, or maybe even a little larger," explains Nancy Zidonis, coauthor of *Equine Acupressure: A Working Manual. Manual*.

Amy Snow adds, "Meridian drawings offer you a guide, not an exact location." But, because of the large margin of error, if you're in the general area of the acupoint, it's probably doing some good. Acupoints are found in the valleys of the body-in the depressions next to or between muscles, bones, tendons and around joints. They're not on the top of bones or in the belly of a muscle. "Often, acupoints look different, feel harder or softer, warmer or cooler, and are more sensitive to touch than the surrounding area or the remainder of the meridian pathway," explains Marie Soderberg.

So, relax, have fun and take some time to familiarize yourself with the locations of acupoints. With a little practice, you'll find them.



Nancy Zidonis (left), Marie Soderberg (center), and Amy Snow (right) have pioneered the use of acupressure in animal care.



In TCM, the underlying assumption is that the body must be energetically in balance to function properly."

Marie, a certified massage therapist and one of the lead instructors for Tallgrass, adds, "If we're alive, we have life force energy, or Chi. This energy flows through pathways in the body, called meridians. At certain points along each meridian, the energy can be more easily accessed and either increased or sedated, depending on the condition that's being treated."

"When these points-called acupoints are treated with finger pressure," explains Amy, "it clears energy blockages or stagnations and rebalances the energy flow so that health is maintained or restored."

Benefits of Acupressure

While not a substitute for regular veterinary care, acupressure can be used to help treat a variety of equine ailments. Treatments are safe for the horse even if given by a horse owner just learning about acupoints and meridians.

Some of the benefits include:

- Releasing endorphins necessary to reduce pain
 - Relieving muscle spasms
 - Resolving injuries more readily by removing toxins and increasing blood supply
 - Enhancing mental clarity required for focus in training and performance
 - Releasing natural cortisone to reduce swelling
 - Building the body's immune system.

Dr. Mary Brennan, DVM, author of *Complete Holistic Care & Healing for Horses*, often teaches her clients beneficial acupressure points as ongoing supportive care to back up her stronger treatments, particularly acupuncture. "Acupressure can be a very effective form of treatment," she states. "I wouldn't rely on it as a treatment in and of itself, but it can be very helpful. It's also another nice thing you can do to help your horse relax."

Getting Started

"There are several steps in giving an acupressure treatment," explains Marie.



Amy snow performs the opening and the closing of an acupressure treatment.

These acupoints on the hind leg are beneficial for muscles, tendons, digestive system, fatigue, arthritis and hooves. From top to bottom, with red dots: Gall Bladder 34 (influential Point for muscles and tendons; relieves stifle pain), Stomach 36 (Master Point for abdomen and gastrointestinal tract; relieves fatigue; benefits digestion; helps restore immune system), Bladder 60 (Aspirin Point; use for arthritis of hock and soft tissue injury). Near coronet band from left to right, with blue and red dots: ting points for Bladder 67 (balances energy of entire meridian; benefits navicular and hoof problems), Gall Bladder 44 (relieves laminitis, arthritis and hock problems), Stomach 45 (relieves indigestion and stomach pain).



Through the entire process, it's important for the person performing the treatment to watch for releases in the horse. "These can be obvious or subtle, such as lowering the head, licking, chewing or softening the eye," says Nancy. Other releases are yawning, changes in breathing, twisting the neck, hollowing the back, moving away from or into the acupoint that's being worked, increasing gut sounds or passing gas, as well as relaxing the chin, mouth or ears.

It's also ideal to have a helper when giving an acupressure treatment. This person holds the horse with a loose lead so that the horse is free to move his head and neck and turn into or away from the point work.

Dr. Brennan advises horse owners to be conscious of the horse's reaction, and mind-

ful of their own safety as well. She says, "Be very aware when you are doing acupressure ... your horse may not automatically like it, and you might not get the response you expect. If a point is very sore, the horse might not tolerate it."

Preparation

Find a comfortable location where you and your horse can relax. Before performing an acupressure treatment, take a few moments to gently stroke or touch your horse. Watch him for signs of release, signaling he's calm, comfortable and responsive, and that it's a good time to proceed with your session. At this point take a few



moment to assess your horse:

- general demeanor?
- any indication of pain?
- eyes dull or bright?
- listening to you?
- signs of recent injury?
- coat condition?
- breathing normally?
- hot or cool areas on his body?
- ease of movement?

Opening

The opening phase prepares your horse for bodywork by enhancing his own awareness of his body. Put the heel of your palm, with your fingers relaxed, in contact with his body. Starting at the upper neck, apply about two to four pounds of pressure and run your hand down his neck



(above): Amy Snow uses her thumb to work the Kidney 3 acupoint, which is the Source Point for the Kidney meridian. Kidney 3 is good for older, tired or lethargic horses, as well as for winter treatments. The red dot indicates Bladder 60, the "Aspirin Point." Because the points are on opposite sides of the hock, both can be worked at the same time with your thumb and forefinger.



from the poll to the withers. Staying about 3 inches off the side of the spine, stroke from the withers to the hindquarters. Continue your hand pressure over the croup, down the rump and over the gluteal and hamstring muscles. Follow the rear of the leg to the hock and to the hoof

Repeat this three times on both sides of your horse's body. While you're performing the opening, try to distinguish differences in your horse's body temperature and muscle tone. Can you pick up hot or cool areas, depressions or protrusions in the acupoints?

Point Work

Now it's time to work the acupoints. Use either the ball of your thumb or place your middle finger on top of your index finger. Put gentle, firm pressure on the point for three to eight seconds. "Exhale as you go into the point, and inhale as you come away from the point," suggests Amy.

Use six to eight acupoints per session. You can target certain sets of acupoints for particular problems, or in the opening work you may have found areas of sensitivity. If so, apply pressure to the acupoints in that area. Learning the fine art of acupressure treatment takes time and experience, but here are some guidelines.

"If an acupoint is sensitive to light pressure, is protruding or is warm to the touch," explains Nancy, "it can indicate an acute problem and calls for the acupoint to be sedated. To do this, apply light pressure, feel for a level or place of resistance and keep the pressure at that level until the resistance dissolves. Then, apply slightly more pressure until you again feel some resistance. Wait until the resistance dissolves and exert a little more pressure." The process of sedating a point may take as long as five minutes, so be patient and proceed slowly.

On the other hand, if the point is felt as a depression, is cool or cold to the touch, it may be tender when deep pressure is used. "Depressed points usually indicate a chronic condition and need to be strengthened," says Amy. "To do this, apply pressure in short, pulsating movements. Toning or strengthening a point takes less time than sedating a point, and a good indicator that it's being stimulated

(left): Amy's thumb works Bladder 40, the Master Point for the hindquarter, hips, and larger joints. The red dot marks Bladder 60.



Marie Soderberg works on the Bai Hui point, which is beneficial for all hindquarter and lameness issues. It also helps strengthen the spine. The Bai Hui is located on the dorsal midline o the back.



Marie presses her thumb on Bladder 60, the "Aspirin Point." This acupoint is useful for arthritis in the hock and soft tissue injuries.

is when the point warms to the touch." Not sure how much pressure to apply? Dr. Brennan offers the following advice in *Complete Holistic Care and Healing for Horses*: "To determine the amount of pressure to use, experiment on your own body, pressing

HOT TIP!

Learn how acupressure can help your horse through colic at www.horseillustratedmagazine.com this month.



When Not to Perform Acupressure

Remember, acupressure is not an alternative to proper medical care. If your horse is ill or injured, call a veterinarian ASAP. There are some instances when it's best to avoid acupressure. These include:

- ❖ just after feeding: wait three or four hours
- ❖ after a strenuous workout: wait until horse has cooled completely
- ❖ when the horse has a high fever: call your veterinarian
- ❖ if your horse has an infectious disease: call your veterinarian
- ❖ if your horse is on daily medication from a veterinarian to treat a medical problem, get the vet's OK before performing acupressure
- ❖ after your stallion has bred a mare: wait 12 hours
- ❖ when your mare is pregnant: resume treatments after the foal is born
- ❖ not directly over wounds, bruises, cuts (although pressing non-painful points near an injury can be beneficial)
- ❖ if your horse reacts with extreme sensitivity, release the pressure immediately—resistance may indicate a behavioral issue or a medical problem that needs to be evaluated by a veterinary professional

Dr. Brennan feels acupressure is a safe form of treatment, but she recommends that horse owners do their homework before trying it. "They should be guided by a manual or a trained individual explaining what points are safe and what might be harmful," she says.

In Dr. Brennan's opinion, most people aren't really strong enough to harm a horse with acupressure, but she stresses that it is still important to use good judgment and common sense about anatomy. Use caution when working around delicate tissues and structures. "Therein lies the art of any modality you use," she says. "Acupressure points are not always in the same place on every horse, and sometimes you have to make a judgment, just as when practicing traditional medicine."

For More Information

Tallgrass Animal Acupressure provides training classes in acupressure and educational materials, including: ***Equine Acupressure: A Working Manual, Introducing Equine Acupressure*** video, posters and charts. For more information, visit www.animalacupressure.com.

Other resources include:

Complete Holistic Care and Healing for Horses, Mary L. Brennan, DVM. Trafalgar Square, 2001.

Healing Your Horse: Alternative Therapies, Meredith L. Snader, VMD. Hungry Minds, Inc; August 1993.

International Veterinarian Acupuncture Society, WAS Course Manual, 6th edition.

your thumb or middle finger against various places on your face, chest, and on your other hand, for 10 to 15 seconds. The pressure should be firm enough so that you experience it as hard and steady, but it should not be painful or damaging to the skin." She reminds, "If your horse is extremely sensitive, exert less pressure. If he seems unaffected by a lighter touch, use more pressure for the treatment to be effective."

Closing

When you've completed the point work, end the acupressure session with closing work. As you did in the opening phase, use your hand to trace each of the meridians you worked during the point work. The closing work reinforces the energy flow between meridian points stimulated during point work, and it establishes a healthy cellular memory pattern.

"Cellular memory is the cell's learned response to a stimulus, such as pain. Over a 24-hour period following an acupressure treatment, the cell's previously learned negative responses begin to be replaced with positive response," says Amy.

Treatment for the Times

Many of us seek ways to help our horses through traditional and complementary therapies. With thousands of years of use in the Eastern world, acupressure is becoming accepted alongside Western medicine. While it's no substitute for veterinary treatment, acupressure offers horse owners another avenue for care and preventive therapy. "With acupressure," says Marie, "we're not healing the horse. Rather, we're offering an environment in which horses can start the healing process themselves."