

Natural Leg Care Methods: Part 1 - Cooling and Warming Remedies

by Katharine Lark Chrisley, NHC, RMT

Your horse's *soundness* could be defined as many body systems working in balance without pain or distortion. Soundness of limb covers everything from the hoof to the withers and the hoof to the pelvis. And because your horse is essentially walking on his "fingers" from the knee down and the hock down, his hooves and legs need your diligent care and attention, especially if he is worked.

Each equine leg is one "digit" with the same system of bones that you have in your finger simply elongated and "loaded" differently. Depending upon his activity, the stress on this intricate system can be quite extreme. Obviously a sensible work program should be followed, but sometimes the unexpected happens. So a program that addresses strain and injury will help heal them, and can prevent further problems. Such a program would include the following.

Finding the cause

When a horse pulls up lame, first check the hooves (if there is no obvious sign of injury). Very often an injury to, or object embedded in, a hoof will be the cause of lameness. If not, then work your way up the leg to find the site of distress.

When walking or trotting (or the lateral gaits), the horse's head will rise as weight is placed upon the foreleg that hurts. On a hind leg, the horse will keep it weighted as little as possible; the leg that "hurries up" to get weight off of it is the one that hurts.

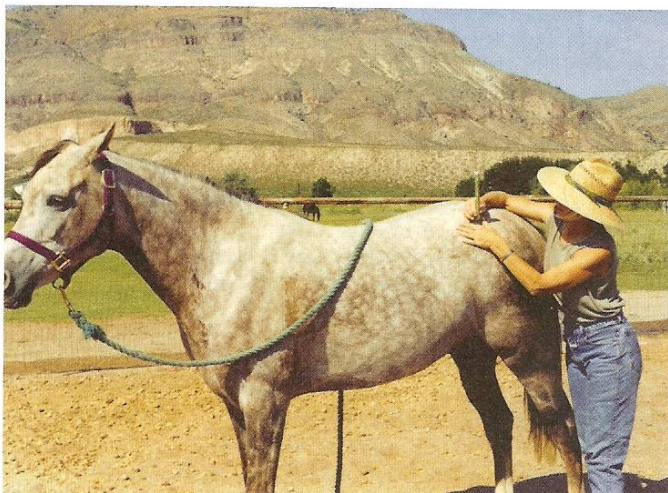
Cooling remedies

Simple "cold hosing" with water is a profound healer for acute injury or stress. It helps reduce inflammation (not necessary circulation) and pain, with no side effects. It should be done where the water used will have a secondary use such as in a pasture or by some trees.

You can strengthen tendons, ligaments and toughen the skin with cold sea salt water. The horses that get to work out in the ocean have a profound advantage structurally to others because of the effect of the very cold salt water.

There are herbs that have a cooling effect topically: infusions (teas made by steeping in hot water) of peppermint, spearmint and eucalyptus leaves or decoctions (simmering of the herb in water for 20 minutes) of witch-hazel bark or angelica root will produce wonderful leg washes (or "braces") applied cold, or even chilled by adding witch hazel extract from the pharmacy. Herbs for this use are measured one large handful of leaves to 2 quarts of water, or 2 tablespoons bark/ root to 2 quarts of water. These are to be prepared in non-metal pots (enameled or "Visions" cookware) because metal will change the herbs' volatile oils. Stir with a wooden spoon.

When a limb, shoulder, hip or back is stressed profoundly, the herb of choice is comfrey. This plant is such a deep tissue healer that for use on actual wounds it has been known to close them too quickly



Giving a moxibustion treatment, a useful herb-based therapy for old injuries. This 5-year-old Arabian gelding was orphaned at birth and diagnosed with EPM at age 2. He healed with natural therapies and is a great riding horse.

in cases where debris was present. For bruising and soreness, a decoction of roots (strongest) or infusion of leaves (milder) is used to soak the area topically, and can be mixed into poultices of clay or added to glycerin sweats. Comfrey herb will stain your hands when you are using it, but it makes them feel so good! I use comfrey for new and old injuries.

Warming remedies

Sweats

Leg sweats are for old, chronic injuries and disorders. This is where the use of HEAT is needed. I make comfrey oil, which mixes well into glycerin for a leg sweat: infuse the oil (walnut, olive, etc.) by warming the mixture in a double boiler for several hours or on a warm window sill for 10 days.

To sweat a leg: cover the leg with a thick coating of the comfrey oil, add a layer of vegetable glycerin (if you don't have any, just the oil will do) and wrap it all with plastic wrap or wet paper bag strips. Use leg cotton to hold the heat and finish with a standing or polo bandage. Leave this on for 12 to 24 hours.

Other ways to introduce heat to a chronic condition are: liniments, fomentations, Epsom salts soaks, simple bandaging, and moxibustion. Effleurage, kneading and percussion are all massage techniques that also add warmth and are especially useful over large muscles.

Liniments

Herbal liniments can be purchased or made (see below for an easy recipe) and are rubbed into the leg(s) to stimulate circulation. It is not recommended to bandage over liniments – the skin can become blistered. A good method is to massage the liniment into the leg in the mornings and wrap the bare leg at night.

Fomentations

Fomentations are hot mixtures of herbals in water applied by soaking a towel and holding it to the leg/ shoulder/ hip until the heat dissipates, then soak and re-apply. These are good for joint care because it is not easy to wrap a joint without causing stress to it. Herbs to use in fomentations are:

Comfrey root - for bruising, bone injuries, sprains, strains

Yarrow blossom - for edema and tissue tearing just below the surface

Sea Vegetables - (bladderwrack/ kelp) for arthritis and old swelling in joints

Myrrh gum - really de-toxifies and stimulates the movement of lymph

Liniment Recipe:

Use 16 ounces alcohol (vodka, grain alcohol or whiskey; not rubbing alcohol) and 16 ounces water
Add: ½ oz goldenseal leaf, ½ oz myrrh powder, 1 oz calendula flower, 1 oz cayenne powder
Keep in a glass bottle in a warm place for 2 weeks.
Shake daily.
Strain; then place in a dark glass bottle and use as needed. **Keep out of the eyes and away from mucus membranes.**

Epsom salts can be used as a fomentation or as a soak (several handfuls dissolved in really warm water) in a tub that your horse will stand in. The magnesium in the salts will help relieve the renal system of some of its filtering duties while drawing out toxins, infections, and even embedded objects.

Bandaging with layers helps to hold warmth. The bandaging can offer the added benefit of support, because whenever you have an injury on one leg, the others are taking up the extra burden of supporting the body and will need bandaging to ease their stress.

Moxibustion is a direct heat application in the form of smoldering moxa (mugwort) herb. It is very potent and is applied by a veterinarian, acupuncturist or properly trained owner. The moxa *stick* is like a fat stick of incense and is held 2 to 3 inches above a closed, old injury to stimulate the Chi - the life force energy. It is kept moving in a circular fashion, slowly, with the free hand on the horse to detect movement and prevent actual contact with the body.

Feeling your horse's legs each day and after any activity will help you discover any knots, swellings or heat that signal stress or injury. You can help reverse that naturally, with these methods. ☺☺

Part 2 will present homeopathic remedies and a case history.

About the author:

Katharine Lark Chrisley has practiced Phytotherapy (healing with plants) and energy medicine since 1973. She is a Dressage coach, Reiki Master Teacher and author of articles in national magazines, books and manuals about natural health, animals and Buddhist practice. Her company is www.naturalpaths.org.