



Acupuncture comes in many forms and when used in conjunction with traditional diagnostic tools, such as lab work, is helpful in diagnosing ailments in elderly equines

Complementary and Alternative, and Integrative Veterinary Medicine

THERAPIES THAT CONTINUE TO GROW IN POPULARITY

By AMANDA DUCKWORTH / Photos by ANNE M. EBERHARDT

KEEPING HORSES FEELING their best, especially ones pursuing athletic endeavors, is the goal of many. How that is most efficiently accomplished is not a straightforward path and can depend on the individual in question.

One area that is continually growing in popularity is exploring the benefits of acupuncture and chiropractic work. These options are classified as part of complementary and alternative veterinary

medicine (CAVM) therapies, which is a term for therapies that are not part of standard veterinary education or practice. Integrative veterinary medicine (IVM), meanwhile, is the practice of complementary and alternative therapies used in conjunction with conventional care.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) 2019 Model Veterinary Practice Act (MVPA) defines CAVM therapies as “a heterogeneous group of

preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic philosophies and practices that are not considered part of conventional (Western) medicine as practiced by most veterinarians and veterinary technicians/technologists. These therapies include, but are not limited to, veterinary acupuncture, acuthery, and acupressure; veterinary homeopathy; veterinary manual or manipulative therapy (i.e., therapies based on techniques practiced in osteopathy and chiropractic medicine); veterinary nutraceutical therapy; and veterinary phytotherapy.”

The benefits of CAVM are widely accepted. That said, when horse owners are interested in complementary and alternative therapies, it is important that they also keep their veterinarian informed, as they need to be aware of the horse’s whole health history. The American Association of Equine Practitioners addressed this point in “Integrative Therapies You Need to Know” by Dr. Rosemary LoGiudice.

“The primary care veterinarian is the appropriate person to coordinate health care practices for their horse, but he/she needs to know all the therapies being employed,” explained LoGiudice. “Often-times, unknown to the people using these integrative therapies, if not employed properly and by properly trained professionals, there can be side effects and even interactions with conventional therapies that can be detrimental to the horse.

“Owners often begin integrative therapies for an issue before seeking veterinary advice or intervention which, if inappropriate to be used, may cause the condition being addressed to worsen and delay appropriate treatment and therapy. Therefore, it is very important for the horse’s primary care veterinarian to be aware of all therapies being used. This is another example of the importance of having a robust veterinarian-client-patient relationship.”

While this might seem like an obvious point, it is not one that always happens in practice. In July 2021, The Veterinary Record published “Horse owners’

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Among the different types of acupuncture is the delivery of electrical impulses to acupoints (left) and dry needling (right)

attitudes towards and motivators for using complementary and alternative veterinary medicine.”

Researchers explained that because CAVM is becoming increasingly popular for equines, they wanted to survey horse owners about it. The online, cross-sectional survey measured their attitude toward CAVM, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and intention for future CAVM use.

“Despite the lack of scientific evidence and uncertain efficacy, CAVM use appears to be a common practice among horse owners,” researchers explained. “CAVM use has been reported for a variety of indications such as behavioral and musculoskeletal problems, lameness, optimizing performance, injury

prophylaxis, enhancing recovery or chronic conditions in geriatric horses.”

A total of 1,532 owners took part. The questionnaire included 23 questions, and the survey was pre-tested by veterinarians and horse owners of different ages and genders.

The results of the study showed that use of CAVM was reported by 72.5% of all participants, predominantly with a focus on manual therapies and herbal supplements. Additionally, the veterinarian was reported as a source of information about CAVM by 86.4% of all participants.

“The attitude toward CAVM was positive,” researchers concluded. “Predictors for past CAVM use were higher owner age, alternative medicine self-use, and higher education (non-university). The

strongest predictor of future CAVM usage was perceived behavioral control and perceived CAVM efficacy, as well as positive attitude toward and perceived knowledge about CAVM.

“Horse owners showed a high intention to use CAVM with the owners’ perceived behavioral control and perceived CAVM efficacy as the strongest predictor. Veterinarian-client communication is important to inform horse owners correctly.”

These numbers are similar to another study asking similar questions. In October 2021, *Animals (Basel)* published “A Questionnaire Study on the Use of Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine for Horses in Sweden.”

“As the scientific basis for most methods used in CAVM (complementary

“OWNERS OFTEN BEGIN INTEGRATIVE THERAPIES FOR AN ISSUE BEFORE SEEKING VETERINARY ADVICE OR INTERVENTION WHICH, IF INAPPROPRIATE TO BE USED, MAY CAUSE THE CONDITION BEING ADDRESSED TO WORSEN AND DELAY APPROPRIATE TREATMENT AND THERAPY. THEREFORE, IT IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR THE HORSE’S PRIMARY CARE VETERINARIAN TO BE AWARE OF ALL THERAPIES BEING USED. THIS IS ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A ROBUST VETERINARIAN-CLIENT-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP.”

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Acupuncture and Chiropractic

and alternative veterinary medicine) is not well-founded, there is a need for evaluation of the efficacy as well as safety of many methods,” explained researchers. “In order to better understand what evidence and knowledge are most urgently needed, we must know what methods are used, by whom and for what reasons. We asked Swedish horse owners, equine veterinary practitioners, and CAVM therapists about their use of CAVM. CAVM appears to be common in Swedish horses; most horse owners used it for both prevention and treatment of injuries.”

The study was conducted using electronic questionnaires. According to researchers, of the 204 responding horse owners, 83% contacted a veterinarian first in case of lameness, while 15% contacted a CAVM therapist. For back

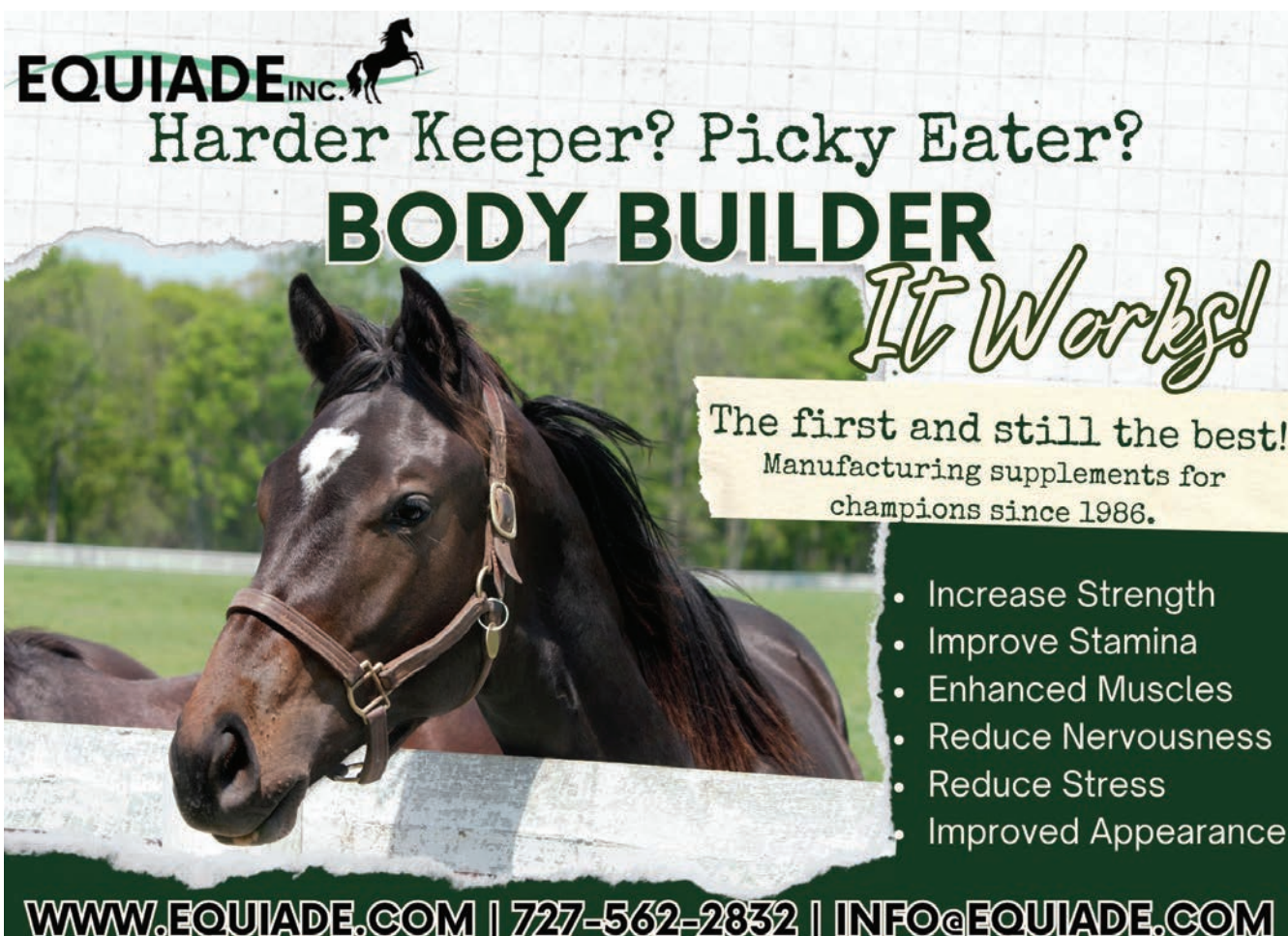
pain, 52% stated a CAVM therapist as their first contact and 45% a veterinarian. Only 10%-15% of the respondents did not use any CAVM method for prevention or after injury.


“The respondents were also given an opportunity to elaborate on why they use CAVM,” explained researchers. “These responses included statements about CAVM as a complement to veterinary care, or for preventive healthcare. Some mentioned the holistic thinking offered by the CAVM therapists; they consult CAVM therapists instead of a veterinarian when their horse has locomotor asymmetries, spinal joint hypomobility, and muscular problems. Some wrote that they consult masseurs or chiropractors for themselves and want to offer their horse the same; one respondent wanted to avoid

pharmaceuticals as much as possible.

“Reasons given for consulting a veterinarian included responses such as trust in the veterinarian who has an education and works according to science. One mentioned consulting a veterinarian when the therapist recommends this. Many wrote that they always consult a veterinarian in case of disease or injury, as this is ethical, safe, and their responsibility as a horse owner.”

Additionally, of the 100 veterinarians who responded, more than half did not use CAVM themselves but 55% did refer to people who offer this service. Of the 124 responding CAVM therapists, 72% recommended their clients to seek veterinary advice when needed, 50% received referrals from a veterinarian, and 25% did not collaborate with a veterinarian.



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Integrative veterinary medicine is the practice of complementary and alternative therapies used in concert with conventional care

Most veterinarians and therapists did note that they were not satisfied with the current lack of CAVM regulation.

As interest in CAVM grows, so does the desire to understand more about it. In December 2022, The Veterinary Clinics of North America, Equine Practice published the review “Optimizing Health—Integrative Medicine & Poor Performance.”

“Addressing poor performance issues in horses is a common yet challenging request to veterinarians,” explained researchers. “Often, there are limited field diagnostic or therapy choices. Growing lay popularity in integrative therapies, as well as increasing clinical incorporation, is creating more awareness of their clinical applications. Many modalities are showing increasing evidence of positive outcomes with minimal harm, but additional safety and efficacy evaluation is needed.

“Integrative modalities have unique ways of perceiving disease patterns that are different from more modern approaches, and these different perspectives can be used diagnostically and therapeutically either combined with more conventional approaches, or when those approaches fall short.”

Horses in different stages of life and various stages of use often have different needs. Knowing if a horse could benefit from CAVM is a topic of recent study. In January 2025, the Equine Veterinary Journal published “Chiropractic effects on stride parameters and heart rate during exercise in sport horses.”

“Equine veterinarians performing chiropractic treatments are frequently asked to evaluate and treat sound horses to improve their performance and address pain associated with the axial skeleton,” explained researchers. “Studies describing the effects and mechanisms of chiropractic treatments in horses without overt lameness are scarce.”

For the study, researchers aimed to evaluate the effect of chiropractic treatments on stride rate, length, symmetry, heart rate, and rider-perceived quality of the ridden work in sport horses. They used a blind randomized controlled trial with crossover design.

In all, 38 horses ridden in the hunter-jumper discipline were enrolled. Researchers noted that exercise tests were recorded before and after chiropractic or sham treatment while horses were wearing a fitness tracker. Stride length, rate and symmetry, heart rate, and the

perceived quality of the ridden work were compared.

“There was a difference in the qualitative assessment of the ridden work by riders between treatments,” researchers concluded. “Riders participating in a blind randomized controlled trial perceived a positive effect of chiropractic treatments on the quality of the ridden work. There were no differences in stride length, stride rate, stride symmetry, or heart rate. The mechanisms, indications, and potential benefits of chiropractic treatments in horses need further study.”

Researchers did note that the main limitation of the study was that the quantitative outcomes measured may not be sensitive enough to detect changes that improve the ridden work. Terrain, weather, and rider were not standard across horses, making small changes difficult to detect. Horses facing specific issues also can be good candidates for CAVM. In October 2022, Animals (Basel) published “The Effect of Chiropractic Treatment on Limb Lameness and Concurrent Axial Skeleton Pain and Dysfunction in Horses.”

“The use of chiropractic techniques is common in horses and a strong body of evidence exists for effectively treating back pain and stiffness,” explained researchers. “Chronic limb lameness can induce complex interactions with the neck, back, and pelvis in affected horses, which can be a challenging clinical issue with limited available conservative treatment options.

“We used a comprehensive array of tests to measure lameness, pain, stiffness, and muscle hypertonicity to evaluate the global effects of chiropractic care in horses with chronic lameness.”

For the study, researchers used two groups of horses with multiple limb lameness (polo) or isolated hind limb lameness (Quarter Horses). They noted that outcome measures included subjective and objective measures of lameness, spinal pain and stiffness, epaxial

muscle hypertonicity, and mechanical nociceptive thresholds.

Horses enrolled in the study received chiropractic treatment on days 0, 7, 14, and 21. No treatment was applied to control horses. Data was analyzed by a mixed model fit separately for each response variable and was examined within each group of horses individually.

“Significant treatment effects were noted in subjective measures of hind limb and whole-body lameness scores and vertebral stiffness,” researchers concluded. “Limited or inconsistent therapeutic effects were noted in objective lameness scores and other measures of axial skeleton pain and dysfunction. The lack of pathoanatomical diagnoses, multi-limb lameness, and lack of validated outcome measures likely had negative impacts on

the results. Further studies are needed to better identify the type and severity of limb lameness that may be amendable to chiropractic treatment.”

As horses age, the potential benefits of CAVM seem a natural path to explore. In December 2022, The Veterinary Clinics of North America, Equine Practice published the review “Preventative Care: Managing the Geriatric Horse with Integrative Therapies.”

“Horses 15 years of age and older now account for a significant portion of the equine population,” explained researchers. “Integrative therapies can provide important diagnostic and treatment tools for managing and maintaining the health of geriatric horses. Aged horses are often afflicted with chronic disease processes that are difficult to effectively manage

with conventional medicinal approaches, such as laminitis and osteoarthritis.

“The geriatric patient should undergo a conventional physical examination as with any equine patient. Any issues noted requiring further diagnostics (e.g., blood work, radiographs) should be performed. However, integrative therapies, such as acupuncture and spinal manipulation (chiropractic), are useful diagnostic aids.”

Each horse remains an individual but continuing education on the best way to care for equines of various ages and lifestyles is beneficial for owners and veterinarians alike. It is also important that owners keep an open line of communication with their veterinarians so that a horse’s whole health history can be taken into account when working on any particular issues. [B+](#)



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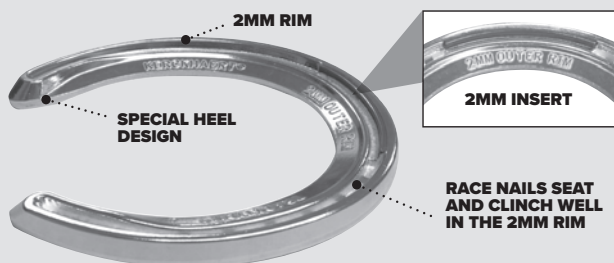
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