

Moxibustion for Humans and Horses

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With the arrival of cold and damp winter weather, chronic joint aches and pains begin to flare up in humans and elder horses. Before you reach for that non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug or analgesic, why not first reach for a Moxa Roll?

One of the most effective therapies for cold and damp conditions of the body is a natural oriental herbal heat therapy called moxibustion. In a moxibustion treatment, specific dried herbs are burned and used to warm regions of the body and acupuncture points. The intention of the treatment is to increase circulation, which promotes healing and provides pain relief, and to induce a smoother flow of blood and “Prana” or “Qi” (energy). The smoke produced from the burning herbs has a pleasant distinct odor of strong incense and is believed to also contribute to the healing effects of the treatment.

The primary herb that is used in moxibustion therapy is *artisma vulgaris*, which is better known as mugwort and which is also often called moxa. Moxa is processed and made available for use in different forms such as Moxa Rolls (or Sticks), Moxa Cones or Loose Moxa. The Moxa Roll, which looks and burns slowly like a long cigar, is used for Indirect Moxibustion Therapy, which is the most prevalent treatment style in use today for humans and horses.

History of Moxibustion

The use of therapeutic moxibustion predates the use of acupuncture. Moxibustion’s history starts in 3500 BCE with the people who lived in the bitter cold plains of Mongolia. Following the interlinking trade routes of Ancient, China, India and Tibet, the practice of moxibustion was introduced to, and adopted and adapted by the practitioners of Traditional Tibetan Medicine (TTM), Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Indian Ayurvedic Medicine.

Today each Asian medical system practices its own unique version of moxibustion. The TCM method of moxibustion is probably the most commonly known and used. Use of moxibustion was promoted by Bian Que, a legendary doctor of Chinese Medicine in the year 500 BCE. Bian Que found that in addition to helping with joint problems, moxibustion was also beneficial for chronic muscular problems and any deficient condition of the body. Some of the earliest Chinese writings on the use of moxibustion with horses date to 475 BCE,

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Equine Moxibustion

While equine acupuncture is more widely known and used than equine moxibustion, in some conditions, such as chronic arthritis, equine moxibustion provides the most effective remedy. Equine moxibustion is a good choice of treatment for: arthritis, joint pain, stiff neck, shoulder pain, back pain, tension and stress. There are also specific equine moxibustion techniques that are used for keeping fit, stimulating the immune system, and avoiding disease.

Basic moxibustion techniques are easy and fun to learn. You can become skilled in moxibustion by reading articles and books, watching DVDs, or attending clinics. Also, if your horse receives acupuncture treatments, your veterinary acupuncturist may be able to share a few techniques with you.

There are four key factors essential to the success of any moxibustion treatment:

- Knowledge of Contraindications and Safety Considerations for Moxibustion
- Correct Problem Identification
- Selecting the correct acupoints/regions for treatment
- Properly stimulating the acupoints/regions

Contraindications and Safety Considerations for Equine Moxibustion

Do not perform moxibustion in any of the circumstances listed below:

- Fever
- Infection
- Open wounds
- Sensitive body areas: head, face, eyes, mouth, groin, sheath and/or testicles, teats, anus, vulva
- Excessively hot climate
- Pregnant mares (refer to your veterinary practitioner)

Due to the fact that you are dealing with fire, safety in the barn should always be a prime concern. Moxibustion should never be done with the horse in a bedded stall or near flammable materials. A safe area such as a bare stall, aisle way, or wash stall should be designated for the session. Because of the smoke produced, moxibustion should always be done in a well ventilated area.

Never leave a lit Moxa Roll unattended. Moxa Rolls should always be properly extinguished at the end of a session.

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Overview of an Equine Moxibustion Session

A quiet environment is essential. The horse needs to be relaxed and responsive. The horse needs to stand quietly for the treatment, so he/she will need to be tied or held by an assistant.

Specific acupoints and areas are selected for the prevailing condition and will be gently stimulated for 5-10 minutes. In addition to assisting with the problem, the warming moxa usually has a calming effect upon the horse, practitioner and any onlookers.

To begin, the end of the Moxa Roll is lit. Once the end is glowing red, the ember is held 1-2 inches away from selected treatment location. The ember should never touch, or come too close, to cause discomfort to the skin or hair coat. Stimulation is achieved through indirect warming of the acupoint and area with the Moxa Roll. The goal here is to provide gentle heat, not intense heat to the desired area. In fact, the gentler the session, the longer the effects last.

There are a variety of ways for the practitioner to hold the Moxa Roll that will provide different types of stimulation. Circling the area, or point, is referred to as circling moxibustion. Circling is used to cover larger areas of the body. Mild moxibustion is where the Moxa Roll is held stationary and a little further away from the point to stimulate with gentle heat. Moving the Moxa Roll in an in and out motion at the points or area is referred to as pecking moxibustion. Pecking is utilized to provide more intense heat that is still within the individuals comfort range.

The practitioner always monitors the heat level by continually checking the coat/skin and works with the horse to provide a therapeutic level of heat while maintaining comfort and safety. The objective is to gently warm the area with moxa and maintain at all times a comfort level. Always remove the moxa immediately if the heat becomes uncomfortable for the horse.

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In Closing

For chronic conditions, such as arthritis, moxibustion sessions may be repeated daily for 3-5 days, then once a week for 3-4 weeks, then once a month for support. This protocol has worked well our equine clients and is a standard we employ with our own horses and horses rehabilitating at our farm. It is a good protocol to start at the beginning of the colder weather, but is effective when started anytime in the season.

Moxibustion therapy is safe, relatively easy to learn, inexpensive and it produces remarkable results. It is a skill that you can master and use on a regular basis for yourself, and your horses benefit for years to come. When you see the positive effects it has on your horse, (or you!) you will always have a Moxa Roll on hand. Your horse will always be thankful you do!

Don Doran has 40+ years of hands-on experience working with a broad spectrum of equine athletes ranging from Kentucky Derby winners to Olympic contenders. Equine Moxibustion is just one of the many modalities that Don offers to his equine clients. Don offers training in equine sports massage, equine electro-acupressure and equine moxibustion as part of the Equine Sports Therapy course curriculum at Animal Dynamics. Look for Don's new book *Equine Electro-Acupressure* on www.Amazon.com.

For more information on equine moxibustion email Don@animaldynamics.com or visit him on the web at www.animaldynamics.com and www.equine-electro-acupressure.com.

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Rosie's Case Study

It was early January in North Central Florida and the weather was cold and damp. Two advanced students were studying with Lisa and I to learn advanced equine acupuncture and related treatment modalities. We received a call for help from John, one of our regular clients, who regularly competes in 50 mile Endurance Rides. "Rosie is acting like she has some neck pain and she feels off behind. Can you come out and take a look at her?" Absolutely was my reply, and I thought to myself, it is a good day for Equine Moxibustion.

We all headed out to the barn and evaluated Rosie. Yes indeed, she did have a great deal of neck pain and she really did not want to talk about it and she really did not want to be touched. Rosie was also presented with some muscle tension in her lumbar-sacral back, gluteals and hip joints.

Rosie looked on doubtfully as we discussed our treatment plan and prepared our equine moxibustion materials. For Rosie's neck pain, we selected a combination of Transpositional and Classical Equine Acupoints. We would use GB-20 at the poll and all nine of the Jiu Wei points at the base of the cervical rhomboids. We would treat those points with the Moxa Roll. For Rosie's hindquarter pain, we would use the Moxa Roll on the Transpositional Acupoints of GB-27, GB-29, GB-30 and BL-54. Additionally, we chose to use Loose Moxa in the Moxa Burner on the Classical Equine Acupoints: Bai Hui, Shen-Shu, Shen-Peng and Shen-Jiao.

Cooperative, but still unconvinced, Rosie stood like a statue with a stiff neck as we began her equine moxibustion treatment. Rosie had no idea of the wonderful experience that was just moments away.

Shortly into the treatment, in response to the gentle warming heat of the moxa, Rosie dropped her head and neck. Her eyes softened. Her lips began to droop in a sign of total relaxation and her breathing slowed as she started a soft lick chew. Rosie gently rotated her neck as if to show a stubborn chronic neck issue had seemed to melt away.

John was delighted to see his hardworking, tough little mare have an opportunity for total relaxation and muscular pain relief. As we left the barn, we were all certain that we saw a smile on Rosie's face.

The next day we received a call from John to say that Rosie felt great on their morning ride! Mission Accomplished.