

CHINESE HERBS CAN HELP EASE EQUINE ARTHRITIS

# An **ANCIENT** perspective on today's horse health



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Whether you ride competitively or for your own enjoyment, maintaining your trail horse's soundness is always a primary concern. If you have a horse that's arthritic, or you simply want to keep him functioning at optimal levels as he ages, using the time-tested approach of Chinese herbs might be just the ticket to keeping lameness at bay. **BY LISA KEMP**

“Whether you’re racking up significant mileage or saddling up for a leisurely sunset stroll, using Chinese herbs can help turn back the clock of time for your horse, allowing you to enjoy each other’s company in comfort for many years to come.”



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## OH, MY ACHING HOCK!

At her equine practice in southeastern Wisconsin, holistic veterinarian Chris Bessent, DVM, sees her share of arthritis and lameness. “With our climate, there’s often a need for injecting hocks with long-acting steroids in order to keep horses sound,” she reports. “Just like humans, animals can feel the weather ‘in their bones,’ and cold or damp conditions can create joint discomfort.”

Bessent says a healthy joint is one that contains a thick, viscous, cushioning liquid—synovial fluid—that shields a horse’s bones from direct contact. Arthritis can occur when the synovial fluid becomes thin and watery due to enzymes released from inflamed tissues. If the fluid is too thin to provide an effective cushion, bones can touch as the animal moves, causing pain.

While Bessent draws upon drugs or other therapies when they’re needed for her equine patients, as a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM) for nearly two decades, she uses

Chinese herbs as support for good health and wellness. She feels the two approaches complement each other.

“Herbs are used for providing a foundation of good health; then, when we need to use the big guns, we can use them more effectively,” she says, pointing out there’s a distinct difference between TCVM philosophy and that of the more traditional Western veterinary medicine we’re used to.

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Chris Bessent, DVM, practices holistic veterinary medicine, utilizing Chinese herbs, acupuncture, food therapy and chi-



ropractic on all animals. After years of using Chinese herbal formulas in her practice, Dr. Bessent channeled her wealth of knowledge and experience into Herbsmith, Inc. ([www.herbsmithinc.com](http://www.herbsmithinc.com)) a holistically-minded company that provides Chinese herbal options for animals.

“Arthritis can be caused by trauma, poor nutrition, excessive concussion or instability to the joint.”

### WHAT DOES A BODY GOOD

“From a Western perspective, arthritis can be caused by trauma, poor nutrition, excessive concussion or instability to the joint, which cause *osteophytes*. They’re like gravel on a high-nerve fiber cartilage surface,” says Bessent.

Traditional treatments for arthritis usually involve moderate exercise and judicious use of anti-inflammatories; glucosamine can be added to improve overall joint health. “From a Western perspective, we want to decrease inflammation to the joint capsule and joint surface, plus increase the viscosity of synovial fluid. Those are very specific, diagnostic issues that we’re trying to pinpoint and correct, which is what Western medicine is excellent for,” says Bessent.



She reports that with TCVM, it’s less about diagnostics or knowing the exact pathophysiology and more about correcting the underlying disharmony that’s precipitating the problem. “With Chinese medicine, it doesn’t matter if the issue is due to genetics or trauma, or if it’s an injury to a joint or a degenerative disease; any disharmony is considered an obstruction to the flow of Qi,” she says.

### GOING WITH THE FLOW

Qi (pronounced *chee*) is the vital life force within the body, circulating throughout and providing the ‘electricity’ that the body runs on. Disruptions to Qi can show up as a throbbing achiness or pain in the affected area; in a horse, it can show up as lameness, or arthritis in the affected joint.

Acupuncture is one way of stimulating the flow of Qi in the body; Chinese herbs are another. Bessent uses both in her equine practice, and says they’re a great way to gently assist the body in finding a balance of optimal health.

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## HERBALS FOR WHAT AILS YOU

"Some herbs stimulate the flow of both blood and Qi, ultimately removing the obstruction and with it, the symptoms. Some herbs also have a warming quality, warming the horse so they're not as vulnerable to external pathogenic factors like wind, cold and damp," explains Bessent. She points out that where Western herbs are typically used singly (e.g., echinacea to boost immunity), Chinese herbs are always combined in a formula of several herbs, which then work in synergy with one another.

"A formula to address joint discomfort typically contains herbs such as notopterygium root, angelica and achyranthes, which all have anti-inflammatory qualities," says Bessent. Herbs such as frankincense and ligusticum may be added to increase blood flow and relieve discomfort; cinnamon bark and licorice root have

**"The chronically arthritic and geriatric horse, both of which frequently have lost the gleam in their eye and spring in their step due to chronic joint issues and discomfort, can often benefit from herbs."**

antioxidant qualities that help maintain overall health and protect the body's vital organs.

Chinese herbal formulas can also take into account the many 'temperaments' that an arthritic horse might have. "A horse in the early stages of arthritis, or one that's exhibiting the typical 'spookiness' or unsettled behavior caused by an instinctual response to pain, can benefit from the added calming effect of an herb such as poria; when combined with the formula it would help the horse maintain his composure along with restoring the flow of Qi to relieve the soreness," reports Bessent.

The chronically arthritic and geriatric horse, both of which frequently have lost the gleam in their eye and spring in their step due to chronic joint issues and discomfort, can often benefit from herbs such as rehmannia root, white peony root, or codonopsis being added to a joint support preparation, to increase overall energy and vitality.

## HELPING OUR HORSES

Chinese herbal formulas have a cumulative effect, gently persuading the body in

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the right direction toward health; however, it's still crucial to provide a horse with proper nutrition, adequate fluids, veterinary and farrier care, and regular exercise to attain optimal results.

Bessent says that while it takes time to see the full response, it also takes

time for the positive effects to go away. "It's not the type of thing where you'll see a complete reversal the next day. However, if you stop using herbs pre-ride before a competition, it can take weeks for the positive results to dissipate, and for stiffness and discomfort to return," she reports. Chinese herbs are also not harmful to a horse's gastrointestinal tract, like many medications; Bessent feels they're not necessarily a substitution for Western medicine but often a great complement to it.

Whether you're racking up significant mileage or saddling up for a leisurely sunset stroll, using Chinese herbs can help turn back the clock of time for your horse, allowing you to enjoy each other's company in comfort for many years to come.



Lisa Kemp is an award-winning writer for the equine industry. Her early life with horses was spent trail riding and she enjoys returning to it now when she can.

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