

Alternative vs Conventional

Alternative, holistic, natural, eastern, homeopathic, herbal – these are just a few of the more common terms used to signify a distinction between one viewpoint in medicine from common, western, traditional, conventional medicine. But truly what is the difference? One method uses chiropractic, acupuncture, herbs, energy work, etc. and the other uses surgery and drugs; is this really the difference or is there more? Is one way better than another, is one way safer than another, how about cost, can the two methods be used together to get the best of both worlds?

Holistic medicine is the most frequently used term for using chiropractic, acupuncture, herbs, homeopathy, etc. However holistic implies that the practitioner needs to look at the whole picture of a patient and everything affecting the patient to develop proper treatment options, therefore it needs to include conventional medicine. For example, a horse with a deep wound and a severed artery, or a horse with a twisted intestinal loop will indeed need conventional medicine to survive. Oh, one could try acupuncture or another energy therapy to correct these problems; however, there would be better results obtained from conventional medicine, not to mention a good malpractice suit if the veterinarian didn't suggest conventional methods. In fact, in emergency medicine nothing is better than conventional medicine. So when thinking holistically about medicine one has to take into account all aspects, including alternative and conventional options of treatment.

Now alternative medicine outshines conventional medicine as preventative medicine. You could use vaccinations and deworming, however, there would be better results obtained from alternative medicine. The reason why is in the focus and approach to protection. That is what preventative medicine is ... to protect your horse from illness and injury. In conventional medicine, the focus is very specific when dealing with vaccines. It utilizes one component of the immune system to pinpoint a specific agent and neutralize it. The problem with this system is accuracy. Influenza, rhinopneumonitis, strangles, and potomac horse fever, for instance, all have vaccines that many times do not work because the organism affecting the horse is slightly different than the one the horse was vaccinated against. However, the major difference in the preventative medicine focus comes in how the disease causing organisms are prevented from causing disease. In the conventional system, using vaccines and deworming, the disease has to infect your horse before treatment can work, meaning your horse has to catch the disease before it can prevent it from causing symptoms. In the alternative case the body's first line of defenses are optimized so that when your horse is first exposed to the organism it is destroyed before it infects your horse.

To better understand this, you need to know about the two major components to the immune system. The one component is used every single day and wages war against all invading organisms and it is very non-specific. It includes defenses such as the skin, mucus membranes, digestive enzymes, white blood cells and other immune system cells. This entire non-specific system works to keep organisms out of the body and to destroy any that gain entrance. The second part of the immune system is very specific and relies on the body being familiar with the infecting organism. It utilizes antibodies and immune system memory cells, which make antibodies, to destroy organisms that the body has been exposed to before. This makes sense, if an organism has penetrated the first line of defense before it might be able to do it again. However, it is obvious that the body's first choice in protecting itself is with the non-specific part of the immune system because most antibodies and even some memory cells are not life long. The body is so confident in its first line that it just quits making antibodies for the specific organisms that it has encountered in the past. Relying almost entirely on the other parts of the immune system to protect it. So if the body prefers to use the non-specific part of its immune system wouldn't it be more beneficial to enhance this system.

Poor nutrition, an inefficient nervous and circulatory system (the energy system), and the exposure to toxins as well as infective organisms (bacteria, viruses, parasites) all beat down the body's non-specific immune system. Alternative therapies work to optimize this system through proper nutrition, including probiotics and antioxidants, as well as keeping the nervous and circulatory systems in order with hands on therapies, including chiropractic, acupuncture, massage, etc.

Now if a horse already has a disease, it is sometimes best to use both alternative and conventional medicine, which is called complementary medicine. For example, a horse with a respiratory infection or any bacterial infection, it could be best to do both methods. Use an antibiotic to help kill the bacteria at the same time utilize acupuncture, homeopathy, herbals, glandulars, etc, etc. to help the body destroy the organism and recover from the incident (including recovery of the intestinal system from the antibiotic use). Alternative medicine is very helpful as a complement to traditional medicine in chronic diseases such as arthritis, allergies, kidney and liver disease, as well as terminal diseases such as cancer. It is best to have a veterinarian skilled in alternative medicine or have the resources to refer patients as necessary to receive the best care using complementary medicine. This expertise is essential in determining proper treatment protocol and knowing when it is inappropriate or even unsafe to use alternative therapies. For example, one should not do homeopathy and acupuncture on the same day, as they are both energy therapies. Black Walnut is an excellent detoxing agent used in combination with milk thistle, however, it can cause laminitis in a horse. Also even though they are "natural", herbs are very potent chemicals, which can have side effects, or chemical interactions with other compounds, herbs, or drugs. Think about it, hemlock is natural, so just because it is natural does not mean it is safe.

Also there are times when conventional medicine and alternative medicine contradict one another and a decision must be made as to which direction to go. In general, alternative therapies are not as invasive and usually not as detrimental to the rest of the body and immune system, when used to treat a specific problem. So my choice would generally be alternative.

Alternative, conventional, and complementary medicine all have their place and are best at different aspects of health care. They are all a part of the holistic health care system, which looks at all aspects of a patient's life. Both conventional and alternative medicines have side effects and need skilled practitioners to perform any procedure. As always it is best to consult with your veterinarian before any treatment is performed on your horse. As far as cost difference between the two methods, on average it would be a wash. What it costs to prevent disease in your horse alternatively compares to the cost of your horse being treated conventionally for a disease. However, horses being treated alternatively still become ill and some horses not treated by alternative methods never become sick, so one could argue that there is a cost to alternative therapies, but I ask what is the cost for the best preventative care for your horse?

As a side note to the skeptics and naysayers that claim that there is no scientific basis for alternative therapies, I would suggest taking a closer look because there is a tremendous amount out there, if you look. There are scientific studies and information on both sides of the issues, just as there is for conventional therapies. Also for those in denial about hands on therapy (chiropractic, massage, acupuncture) suggesting that it can't be proven because there is no double blind studies and only anecdotal evidence, please look at how many double blind studies have been done on open-heart surgery. None. Well it is obvious that bypass surgery helps with blocked vessels in the heart and I would suggest the same about hands on therapy. It is obvious that hands on therapies and other alternative therapies help!

For more information –

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