

Ask The Owners' Circle

My horse is at the farm because of an injury; are there any new therapies I should look into to assist the healing process?

By Alison LaDuke

Veterinary science has come a long way in a relatively short period of time. Gone are the days of prescribing cold hosing and stall rest for nearly every injury. Vets can now diagnose and correct our animals with technologies worthy of any human, and much of this technology is right at your fingertips. Depending on the injury your horse has sustained, there are many new options you can ask your vet about when trying to speed up or perfect the healing process.

Stem Cell Therapy

Stem cell therapy is probably the most exciting treatment to come around in the last few years. Adult mesenchymal stem cells are harvested from either fat cells or bone marrow cells of the afflicted horse, processed to isolate the stem cells, and used for a variety of injuries. Research has focused on soft tissue injuries, osteoarthritis and fractures with the most widely treated injury being bowed tendons, a common soft tissue injury among race horses. Only 18% of horses treated for bows have a recurrence of the injury, whereas horses without stem cell therapy “re-bow” upwards of 56% of the time. Dr. Robert J. Harman, DVM, MPVM, the CEO of Vet-Stem, a laboratory which specializes in stem cell therapy, recently reported significant findings in the world of stem cells at a regenerative medicine conference in Santa Ynez, CA. Based on the last two years of study, suspensory ligament injuries see a 76% return to full work at the prior level, joint disease patients return at a 56.7% clip and 77% of tendon injuries return to full work.

The UC Davis School for Veterinary Medicine near Sacramento and Alamo Pintado Equine Medical Center in Los Olivos are two of the more active clinics offering stem cell services in California. More information and videos of Stem Cell Therapy can be found on the TOC website.

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Hyperbaric O₂ Chamber

In the last decade, Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT) has taken off as an additional means to healing and improving our race horses. Unlike stem cell therapy, there was a large body of research on humans and hyperbaric oxygen chambers prior to it becoming common in the equine world. The therapy takes place inside a special chamber where the animal breathes oxygen while the pressure inside the chamber is slowly increased above normal atmospheric pressure. Under these conditions, oxygen dissolves into the body and is transported to all tissues, even those with poor blood supply. The typical treatment session lasts about one hour, and the frequency of treatments depends on the injury or condition. This treatment speeds the healing process of chronic wounds, decreases swelling, helps fight infection by making antibiotics work more efficiently, and rids the body of many toxic poisons, all while promoting the growth of new blood vessels in tissues that may have been deprived of oxygen.

One of the great advantages of HBOT is its broad range of uses, including treatment of colic (post-surgical), laminitis, soft tissue injuries, and infections. While there is often a good chance that it can help, it is important to remember that HBOT should be used in addition to any other surgeries and treatments your horse may need, and it is not meant to replace them.

Other Therapies

Many other non-invasive therapies are worth exploring, including laser therapy, ultrasound technology, chiropractic care, and underwater treadmills. Additionally, there are many new diagnostic tools that rival human medicine, such as Equine MRIs and cat scans, which vets can now use to pinpoint their diagnoses to a remarkable degree.

As always, be sure to discuss these therapies with your vet before taking any action, as each horse is an individual and should be treated as such. Your vet can also recommend other treatments not mentioned here and refer you to equine hospitals that fit your horse's specific needs.