

Complementary Medicine and Alternative Therapies for Pets

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

You may be familiar with seeing a chiropractor or enjoying a massage yourself, but did you know that these therapies can also have enormous benefits for dogs and cats? No longer considered unusual luxuries, complementary medicine and alternative therapies have become a normal part of canine and feline physical therapy and rehabilitation—once considered “alternative” themselves.

Rehabilitation therapy “is not an alternative therapy but part of the standard of care,” says Dr. Julia Tomlinson, a board-certified specialist in canine sports medicine and rehabilitation and equine surgery who owns Twin Cities Animal Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine Clinic in Minnesota. “Rehabilitation therapy treats muscle, tendon, ligament, nerve, bone, and joint injuries and uses physical medicine to restore maximal function and relieve pain.”

Dogs and cats may need rehabilitation for any number of reasons. “Patients include those who have undergone surgery, patients with injuries for which surgery is not indicated, elderly patients with mobility problems, patients with diseases of the nervous system, and working and sporting dogs with their unique injuries and needs,” according to Dr. Tomlinson.

Much like in human medicine, pet rehabilitation therapy might involve:

- **Active exercises**, during which the therapist uses a variety of methods to help pets regain strength and improve their flexibility and balance
- **Passive range of motion exercises**, in which the therapist moves the pet's limbs to prevent joints and muscles from tightening with lack of use
- **Equipment**, like orthoses or braces and carts, which can help restore

mobility and protect pets from further injury while they're recovering

- **Pharmaceuticals**, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- **Joint injections**, using disease-modifying osteoarthritis drugs (DMOADs)

An entire industry of other restorative practices, once reserved for humans, are now used both in conjunction with rehabilitation therapy and on their own to help our pets live healthier, more comfortable lives. Let's explore some of these practices.

ACUPUNCTURE

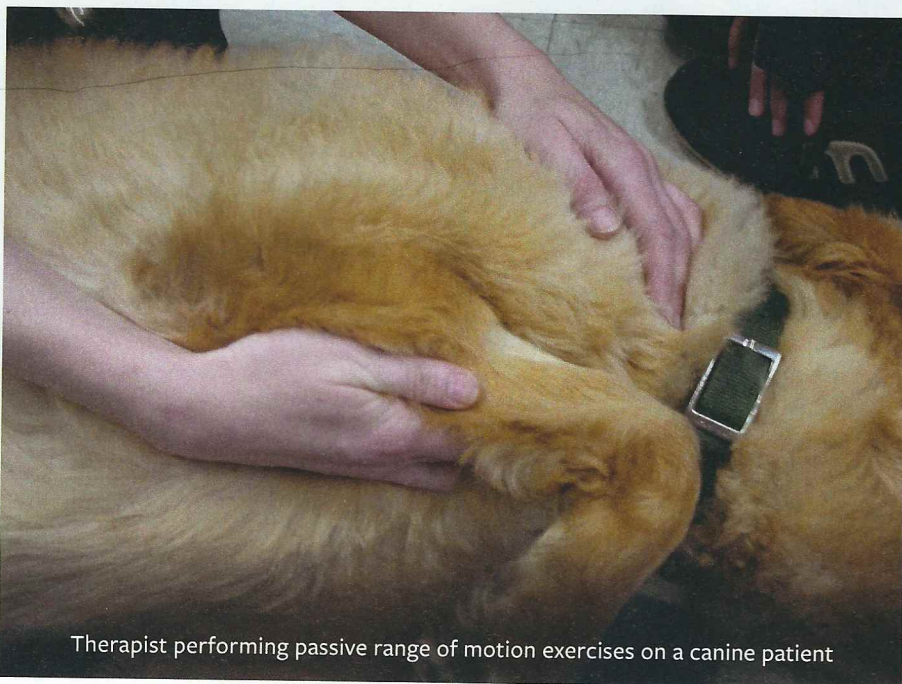
According to Dr. Tomlinson's resident training in the specialty, Dr. Gabriella Varcoe, “Acupuncture is one of the most popular forms of alternative medicine used today. It is minimally invasive, cost-effective, and has been used for thousands of years with proven results.”

Pet parents might turn to acupuncture to help relieve their pets' musculoskeletal, neurologic, endocrine (hormonal), gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, respiratory, and dermatologic conditions.

A veterinarian trained in acupuncture will insert small, fine needles into certain points on your pet's body to stimulate the nervous system to produce various physiologic effects, ultimately helping your pet's body to heal itself.

Just some advantages of acupuncture may include:

- Pain relief (achieved by releasing endorphins)
- Release of hormones
- Nerve stimulation



Therapist performing passive range of motion exercises on a canine patient

- Reduced muscle spasm
- Increased circulation
- Anti-inflammatory effects

Even if your pet hates shots, you probably don't have to worry about her reaction to the tiny needles used in acupuncture. Pets don't usually notice the needles being inserted, and once they're in place, your pet shouldn't feel pain from the needles themselves and will likely relax. As long as you visit a properly trained veterinarian, acupuncture is very safe and tends to have few side effects.

Never take your pet to an acupuncturist or chiropractor who primarily treats humans.

MASSAGE

Dr. Tomlinson typically sees sporting dogs benefit from receiving regular massages as well as dogs with arthritis or other painful conditions who seem to "hurt all over." If your pet falls into one of these categories, ask your veterinarian if massage might help, and ask him or her to recommend a therapist who specializes in treating pets. Your veterinarian will make sure the massage therapy works with your pet's other treatments and conditions.

In this type of therapy, *a massage therapist will manipulate your pet's soft tissues—usually manually—to:*

- Provide pain relief by overriding the activity of pain-signaling nerves
- Improve tissue flexibility
- Increase circulation
- Help detect muscle discomfort, tightness, and atrophy
- Promote rehabilitation

If your pet seems to enjoy therapeutic massage, ask your pet's massage therapist for some strokes you can use at home. You'll give your pet some additional pain relief and a chance to relax while bonding with her.



A canine patient receiving massage therapy

ADDITIONAL ALTERNATIVES

For pets with chronic or acute injury, musculoskeletal pain, or other conditions affecting her wellbeing, *ask your veterinarian if your pet would benefit from:*

- **Laser therapy**, a noninvasive procedure that uses light energy to treat skin issues, increase circulation, and stimulate tissue repair
- **Other energy-based therapies**, such as neuromuscular electrical stimulation (NEMS), transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), and therapeutic ultrasound
- **Chiropractic** (known as **veterinary spinal manipulative therapy**, or **VSMT**, in veterinary medicine), involving gentle vertebral, joint, and cranial adjustments to relieve a variety of conditions to improve or normalize joint motion; VSMT is different than human chiropractic and requires different training

- **Hydrotherapy**, a form of rehab therapy that tends to require a specialty clinic, where pets use underwater treadmills, swim therapy, water massage, and other low-impact exercise to strengthen muscles and improve balance without aggravating joints or injured or weakened limbs

If any of these treatments sound like they might help your pet, turn to your veterinarian before trying them out. "Only a licensed veterinarian can diagnose and prescribe treatment," Dr. Tomlinson says. If your veterinarian doesn't provide the service, ask if he or she can recommend a trusted therapist.

Andrea Vardaro Tucker, a board-certified editor in the life sciences and HealthyPet magazine copy editor, and her 10-year-old West Highland White Terrier share a love for massage.

Photos courtesy of Twin Cities Animal Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine Clinic